

Closing Diversity Report, June 2021

Six months ago, in response to the Student Workshop's first ever diversity report, SW President Joshua Thomas wrote the following:

“The opening report has highlighted areas for improvement in The Student Workshop that we as a committee and as a community must now respond to.”

In this closing diversity report for the academic year, I will be assessing how successful the response of The Student Workshop has been over the last six months. It is important to note, in the interest of accountability, that Student Workshop Staff Liaison, Rebecca McCutcheon was also given the opportunity to comment on that opening report, but failed to do so.

For context, I will be focusing in on the same key headings as in the opening diversity report:

- The Student Workshop & The Wider Department
- Expansion of The Student Workshop
- Representation in Performance

I will be analysing the performances, workshops, speakers, podcast guests, and anonymous comments made by current students to formulate this report, closing with recommendations for The Student Workshop and my eventual predecessor in this role.

The Student Workshop & The Wider Department

In the opening report, I highlighted the belief amongst students that, “the work we do within The Student Workshop should really be more strongly founded in what the department does.” This comment was made in reference to the diverse range of research topics explored by lecturers within the department, and whilst it has been a difficult year to come together as a cohesive unit and explore a wide range of topics, there are elements of The Student Workshop's work in this area over the last year that we can look upon very positively.

The work of the CCL and First-Year Rep in platforming important voices and issues through The Student Workshop podcast should be celebrated, and some of the most popular and important episodes saw Lynette Goddard talking about, ‘Black Experience in Theatre’, Emma Brodzinski talking about, ‘Theatre and Mental Health’, and Lynette Goddard returning with David Bullen to talk about, ‘Queer Theatre’. The highlighting of three hugely important issues in this way, integrating lecturers who specialise in these areas and holding space for them to lead the discussion is something that The Student Workshop must endeavour to continue next year. It also provides the perfect foundation from which to build upon moving forward into the return of a post-pandemic society. I discussed in the opening report the potential for, “developing workshops in collaboration with the department, sessions framed by either a student or lecturer”, and I believe these podcasts highlight the way in which we can begin to integrate these workshops and open discussions into The Student Workshop's programme of events more regularly.

However, I also emphasised the importance of The Student Workshop holding space and offering more support to students away from the department. I asked SW to, “put the necessary supports in place, create opportunities for students to seek support away from the department and feel represented”, and I still believe this is hugely important right now. Whilst there are, of course, personal tutors and wellbeing services available to students who

are struggling with issues, it still feels necessary to provide a level of peer support, mentorship, a weekly check-in, or focus groups of some sort to provide space for students away from the department should they need it. As a microcosm of the real world and the industry, we have to endeavour to create these opportunities and commit to providing a level of pastoral care within our company. In this aspect, The Student Workshop has not done enough, and so I end this section in the same way I did the opening diversity report:

“We do not have to rely on solely the department to drive change, and we should look to be at the forefront of change as a company, knowing fully that what we do ‘after hours’ can and will impact the rest of the department and students’ involvement in seminars, lectures, and the wider university setting.”

I hope my predecessor bears witness to this change over the coming year.

Expansion of The Student Workshop

In the opening report, I suggested the Student Workshop should look to host speakers, “that are from a diverse range of backgrounds and areas of the industry, and [make] these events accessible and open to the wider university in general”. The idea behind this was that, at the very least, we must recognise the benefits of simply bringing in more diverse audiences, and the way in which this might help to open up further opportunities for representation. For example, if we were to bring in a speaker who conducts research into African Theatre Studies, we would be able to collaborate with, and open this talk up to other societies that may be interested in this. There is a feeling amongst many that The Student Workshop is both exclusive and elitist, in ways that are damaging to its reputation amongst the wider university, and also limiting in terms of its ability to provide necessary diversity, inclusivity, and representation to its members and the wider student population. This has to change, and as of yet, there has been no movement on this front since the opening report. In fact, The Student Workshop has continued to cement these issues of exclusivity with its programming of speakers.

This year, The Student Workshop only hosted talks and workshops by Dick McCaw, Tim Etchells, and Sally Cookson, highlighting a worrying lack of diversity amongst speakers, and whilst it is of course understandable that the pool of speakers and workshop leaders was perhaps lower due to the pandemic, there is also an argument to be made that now really was the time to increase the breadth of content The Student Workshop engages with and promotes. It is also worth noting that whilst the Dick McCaw workshop was exclusive to Student Workshop members, the Tim Etchells and Sally Cookson talks were not, but issues remain in the publicising of these events and their accessibility to the wider student community. In order to attract a more diverse audience to these events, we must first make a greater effort to bring in speakers that will appeal to a wider audience, and secondly, we must form connections with other societies, advertising events that may be of interest directly to them. I would urge The Student Workshop, in the year after the pandemic, to make a more conscious effort to diversify the speakers and workshop leaders they host, and recognise the way in which it can significantly impact, educate, and represent students, university-wide, expanding beyond just the realms of the PDA-School whenever it is possible.

On top of this, I would like to re-emphasise a recommendation I made in the Opening Diversity Report, and something I believe is still a necessity for The Student Workshop moving forward:

“As part of the Student Workshop’s commitment to expand into the wider university setting, it was also suggested that we should reach out to the wellbeing services here, and ensure the committee receive training from them each year around these issues. This would be vital in ensuring we can be supportive and create the safe space necessary for fellow students should any issues arise. If wellbeing services cannot provide the training themselves, it is highly likely they will be able to find us someone else to do it. This is once again an example of a situation in which we must look to take advantage of the services and resources available to us, and in my own personal opinion I struggle to think of many better commitments moving forward at this stage than a constitutional requirement for committee members to be diversity and wellbeing trained each year.”

It remains my belief that this should be, at the very least, an avenue that The Student Workshop must explore thoroughly in the coming year if they wish to provide the best possible inclusivity and support to their members.

Representation in Performance

As I highlighted in the opening diversity report, “Projects like, *Black Lives, Black Words*’ in collaboration with the department are fantastic and provide important opportunities and representation, and we should look to promote more of this, and continue it in terms and years to come. However, we need to see this commitment to diversify our performances all year round; we shouldn’t have to wait for Black History Month to make a statement of our intent.” It is in this area where, looking back on the year that has passed, I feel as though The Student Workshop has missed out on a significant opportunity to provide further representation and a more diverse range of voices in performance. It is vital that The Student Workshop builds upon the success of events like, *Black Lives, Black Words*, and when the opportunity arose for a subcommittee to select a piece to be performed in the second-term, first-year slot, I suggested a collection of monologues written by underrepresented women and trans playwrights. We instead decided to go with, *You Stupid Darkness*, which was a great success of course, but I believe it would have been beneficial to explore the possibility of staging a night of monologues alongside this at some point. With very few trans members of the department’s student body, a night of writing by trans playwrights would have served as the perfect way to provide some important representation without having to fulfil any strict casting requirements – an issue that was also discussed thoroughly in the opening report.

The pandemic has of course limited our ability to perform in a number of ways, but has led to a significant number of opportunities too, one of which being the way that online performance has enabled an increase in the accessibility of The Student Workshop shows. Often times, The Student Workshop productions are very heavily based around aspects of physical theatre, and are therefore rarely inclusive of any students who are not able-bodied. However, with a shift to online theatre this year, anything overly physical was unable to take place, and thus the productions become far more accessible as a result. Whilst of course The Student Workshop can and should continue to explore and produce shows with a physical-theatre base in the future, as we return to in-person performance, it is important that we learn lessons from this past year and continue to provide opportunities for all. I believe one way we

can encourage this, and boost the level of inclusivity for all, is to make it a constitutional requirement for all future bid and audition packs for The Student Workshop's productions to contain an accessibility statement. I am sure, in my past dealings with the various show teams, that no member of The Student Workshop ever wishes to alienate any students, and that many directors would be more than willing to work around any cast members level of ability, but an accessibility statement is a vital way to show this to potential auditionees and new students. The issue is not just in the content of the show, but in the way it is advertised. As I wrote in the opening diversity report, "how can we ever expect anyone other than able-bodied actors to audition and be involved?" Accessibility statements are a minor change that could make a major difference to how inclusive The Student Workshop is. I feel it is also important that alongside these statements, The Student Workshop supports show teams in providing them with the flexibility to adjust roles and adapt positions on the crew throughout the process, as in the past this is something that has been quite strict, and it is often the case that a lack of flexibility can lead to a lack of inclusivity. We want to be able to provide the most representative, and inclusive, show experience possible, and the flexibility to adapt roles based on students' abilities and other factors is vital, whether this simply be character names, the crew job descriptions, or perhaps one of the physical practitioner's the piece draws influence from. These are such manageable changes that have the potential to significantly boost representation in performance, and The Student Workshop's level of inclusivity as a whole, and I hope to see a commitment to take these suggestions on board moving forward.

In Conclusion...

...whilst The Student Workshop has certainly made some significant improvements in terms of representation, diversification, and inclusivity, increasing its membership, and involving a wide range of students in various opportunities, during what has undoubtedly been a challenging year, there is still a long way to go. A great deal of progress must be made, not only in the aforementioned areas, but in terms of this particular role too, the Diversity Officer.

The creation of this role came off the back of the global, 'Black Lives Matter' movement, as organisations around the world began the process of holding themselves accountable, and attempting to introduce positive change. But, as the year went on, the support for this role, and the inclusion of it within The Student Workshop dwindled, and it is something that has not gone unnoticed in discussions with students in the department. There is a general feeling from many that the introduction of this role was one of a somewhat performative nature, and its actual impact has been non-existent; an idea which begins to hold weight when looking at the number of suggestions from the opening report that have been re-emphasised again here, due to a lack of action. This report must not be read and then forgotten about, action must be taken in response, and I hope my successor receives an increased level of support and inclusion next year: in the formulation of events by the CCL, with the POLO's work on productions, and in the form of meaningful, constitutional change when suggestions are made in both the opening and closing reports.

If we wish to see meaningful change, we must all act with the commitment and enthusiasm required to drive The Student Workshop forward. I wish my successor all the best.

- *Ethan Chappell-Mason, The Student Workshop Diversity Officer 2020-21.*

Statement from the new President of The Student Workshop, Cordelia Tarbrooke:

Upon reflecting on the thoughts of Ethan Chappell-Mason, our 2020/21 Diversity Officer, it is enlightening to see the areas of development that we as a committee can make in order to develop the diversification and inclusivity of the company. By bringing this role to the committee in the recent academic year, it has come to our attention that there are changes to be made in order to eliminate the idea of The Student Workshops 'elitism'.

The work of Ethan, alongside Diversity Facilitator, Finn Saunders in conducting focus groups is commendable, as these provide the company with clear evidence direct from the student body, allowing us to pinpoint areas that require development. In the report, Ethan touches on the fact that the company simply cannot rely on the department, *'we should look to be at the forefront of change as a company, knowing fully that what we do 'after hours' can and will impact the rest of the department and student's involvement in seminars, lectures and the wider University setting'*. With the newly elected Diversity Officer at the start of the upcoming academic year, these focus groups will recommence under the newly elected Diversity Officer, continually bringing to the surface specific areas of development that we as a company can ensure plans are put in place to make these changes. It is our aim as a company to offer a microcosm into the real industry, therefore it is instrumental that this Diversity role is not a performative addition to the committee, but a vital role in ensuring we are taking action in order to grow, make change and ensure our programme is inclusive to all creative minds. As students preparing for the industry, the development of this role is vital on the wider industry, as we demonstrate that young people are the driving force for change.

Reflecting on our past year, I am delighted with the variety of Podcasts created by our Creative Collaboration Liaison (Elliot Perlic) alongside our First Year Representative (Libby Herbert) that platformed multiple departmental collaborations voicing underrepresented areas of theatre, such as Queer Theatre, Black Experience in Theatre as well as the role of Mental Health in Theatre. Going forward, this is something we are certain to see more of as both Elliot and Libby are in the process of contacting guest speakers to appear on a Pride Month Podcast. As a result of this report, Ethan has urged me to question the diversity of our workshops and speakers we invite into the company. After launching our 'Speaker in the Spotlight' series, which saw Tim Etchells, Dick McCaw and Sally Cookson talking about their practice, it is clear that our programming of workshops and events currently does not offer scope for diverse representation. To overcome this, I believe after the past year we can learn from the benefits of using an online platform to host events, thus meaning we can reach out to a wider scope of creatives and practitioners ensuring the company can host events bringing light to underrepresented areas of practice. For example, makers of African Theatre, Queer Theatre and playwrights of underrepresented communities such as writers of colour or the trans community, ensuring the diversity of our workshops and guest speakers echoes that of the diversity we have seen in our company podcast this year. To achieve this goal, it is instrumental that we are responding to the voices of the student body. With our newly elected Press and Marketing Officer, I will be encouraging interactive marketing schemes to hear the thoughts of what students would benefit from seeing in order to make each and every student not only feel heard, but feel represented.

After using our social media platforms to support Trans Visibility Day in 2021, the response was mostly encouraging, however it did come to my attention that some followers found using social media for this came across as a performative act. This is welcome feedback to ensure we are going beyond our social media platform and encouraging representation and support of communities (such as the trans community) in practice. I wholeheartedly welcome Ethan's proposition of staging a collection of monologues by underrepresented female and trans writers to represent these creatives in performance and bring a more diverse range of performance opportunities to our members. Coming out of a pandemic I have the utmost certainty that our members and committee will have nothing but enthusiasm for live performance and taking every opportunity to stage work and diversify our programming. It is important we continue to allow our followers to give us this feedback as it has a massive impact on how we run as a company and is always encouraged.

Going forward, I am extremely pleased with our autumn programme of shows, with show teams that are representative of the LGBTQIA+ community. The shows platform different genres of theatre, with gig theatre, Queer theatre and physical theatre available for our members and I am extremely pleased to offer these opportunities. This said, with the involvement of physical theatre it is key that we do not lose sight of the opportunities we are offering for students who are not able-bodied. Ethan makes an excellent suggestion of constitutionalising that all show teams must provide an accessibility statement when bidding a show, and this will be cemented in the constitution at our next General Meeting prior to Autumn Term.

The work of Ethan and Finn over the past year as our Diversity Officer and Facilitator has been excellent at highlighting ways in which we can ensure inclusivity within the company. Going forward I believe this report and all future reports should come to the forefront of not only our company, but also the Royal Holloway, University of London Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance. The way in which the department is run influences the way we run The Student Workshop and vice versa, therefore these reports must be acted on by both parties and will henceforth be referred to in every meeting between the President and Staff Liaison.

Thank you, Ethan and Finn, for your commitment to the role this year, the role will continue to develop over the next few years and will always be as important as it is now. The company and the wider university must continue to make these changes and I will ensure as President these reports are listened to within the company and acted on accordingly.

Cordelia Tarbrooke

The Student Workshop President 2021-2022