

Student Workshop Diversity Report

January 2021

In light of the global ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement over the summer, and the need for individuals and organisations to take increased awareness and action over both how diverse and how inclusive they are, we at the Student Workshop have decided it necessary to examine our own work in these areas and begin the important process of analysis and improvement. With this in mind, the Student Workshop has created the role of a diversity officer, and my first job within this role was to reach out to both current students, from 1st year to 3rd year, as well as recent graduates, hosting focus groups to discuss their personal experiences and gathering any suggestions they had for ways in which we could improve as both a company, and as a department within the university.

There were sixteen students involved in the focus groups in total and the opening questions that I used as conversation prompts were as follows:

- How diverse/inclusive do you feel the SW is?
- Do you feel listened to, valued, represented?
- What would you want to see done differently?
- Are there any projects/shows/speakers/opportunities that you feel would be beneficial in terms of promoting diversity/inclusivity?

I will be drawing upon the information gathered during these focus groups to generate the following report into diversity and inclusivity within the Student Workshop, and hope that with this information we will be able to create a solid foundation for improvement.

Student Workshop & The Wider Department

One of the most common areas of discussion during the focus groups was the relationship the Student Workshop has with the Drama Department, the positives of this currently, the ways in which it could be strengthened, and the opportunities that could arise from development in this area. One recent graduate described the Student Workshop as having a, “great relationship with the department, but a bit of a tricky one,” believing that the work we do within the Student Workshop should really be more strongly founded in what the department does. The lecturers and staff within the department have, for the most part, a diverse range of research that they undertake, and the personal slants they place on many of the courses they teach. We discussed in the focus groups the idea that it could really be quite beneficial for us, as a company, to engage more with these areas of research and the diversity that is inherent within them. Further to this, the idea of more in-depth collaboration was expanded into the discussion, and with it the possibility of developing workshops in collaboration with the department, sessions framed by either a student or lecturer, or perhaps both. Perhaps not always in the form of traditional workshops, and maybe we should explore the idea of open discussions instead. We often don’t know the limitations of our biases and we need to practice challenging these notions, expanding our knowledge and understanding of different areas, challenging any pre-existing notions we have – this should be a commitment that exists at the very core of our work both independently, and with the department.

However, as important as the groups believed collaboration to be, we also discussed the need for an emphasis on our ability to stand alone as an alternate stronghold away from the department. There is a firm belief that the best way in which the Student Workshop can help with the issues discussed and support students that experience any problems is to do what we do best. Creating a dialogue is key and will be undoubtedly beneficial, but it is essential that we find ourselves as a stronghold and maintain necessary levels of separation from the department as a whole. Rather than us getting too wrapped up in trying to change organisational issues that may be far too complex, we should instead aim to provide a space outside through the establishment of safe rooms, discussion groups, and perhaps even through the idea of hosting workshops simply to allow students to hold space. The idea behind this is simply that we need to act, and we need to support our students. If we spend too much time fighting to dismantle complex systems, we risk enabling extended periods of time where students are left feeling as though they have no support in place. Let us put the necessary supports in place, create opportunities for students to seek support away from the department and feel represented, this is what many of the participants in our focus groups believed to be most needed right now, at this very moment.

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.

Expansion of The Student Workshop

As we are all aware, our close connection to the department and students within the department is full of countless benefits, and it is extremely positive to see that the Student Workshop is this year opening up more opportunities for music and film students, but there was much discussion about the potential for the Student Workshop to expand even further beyond these parameters.

There seemed to be a collective feeling within the focus groups that despite what seems to be the current belief of the Student Workshop, speakers actually fare better than workshops in garnering an audience, and the call for a more frequent, diverse range of speakers was at the centre of much discussion. Hosting speakers that are from a diverse range of backgrounds and areas of the industry, and making these events accessible and open to the wider university in general can only be beneficial to the company. At present, the company feels quite exclusive, and whilst elements of this are hugely important to maintain, it is vital we recognise the benefits that simply bringing in more diverse audiences can have. University should challenge us to different views, and Student Workshop provides us with the opportunity, as artists, to shape the world around us. We must never take for granted the ability we have to impact lecturers and students from beyond the drama department, and instead utilise the tools at our disposal to fulfil this role.

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.

Representation in Performance

Another key point that was discussed throughout the focus groups is the issues of representation, diversity, and inclusivity within performances organised and performed by the Student Workshop. After all, as a theatre company, this should be one of the most obvious, and most prominent areas for development.

A major issue that was raised was an inherent lack of diversity within the current student body. This was an issue highlighted on a number of occasions during focus groups, for example one member of the focus group described how, “we’d love to do a show on the black experience, but there would just be such difficulty in casting due to obstacles within the student body.” And so, the discussion moved onto the need to develop diversity training that allows people to read and understand other groups. We discussed how many interesting and equally important plays there would be, but so often we hear the words, “it’s just too uncertain, volatile of a subject”. We worry so much about the logistics and accuracy of things that we become too afraid to step out of our own experience. Not giving people opportunities because we can’t see how they would work logistically is a major problem. Challenge the idea of having representation only come from people of select groups. Everyone should step into that role. It shouldn’t take a black or queer practitioner to have to be in the room for these things to take place, because if you have such small percentages of these groups you will always have these difficulties and this can be useless and traumatic. 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.

The commitment to make our performances more inclusive must also stretch beyond ethnicity and race, and we must commit to recognise the intersectionality of issues involving diversity, the messages we send out to prospective performers, and how we may be subconsciously affecting and alienating students without being wholly aware of it. For example, one person’s experience of being a first year was that the SW lacked very much in inclusivity, and felt as though we had a very overly Eurocentric and heterosexual-centred way of creating theatre. Ultimately, we have students coming from diverse backgrounds being filtered through a European, westernised pedagogy. We need to make decisions and engage with all the ways and resources that teach us different ways of knowing and practice. The groups also described issues with the way in which SW production slots are advertised, and the audition process can feel isolating and fails to allow people to get the most out of their first year. Ultimately, there is a feeling that until you are in the Student Workshop, it feels a very difficult and intimidating task to integrate into the community. Perhaps pushing back the audition slots in first term slightly would allow more students to feel that there is an opportunity to settle into university life properly before they audition, or perhaps we must ensure we get things in immediately and hold more talks from other students that represent the student body, talking about their first year experiences, et cetera. Auditions come quickly and we have to ensure we preempt them in order to prevent students feeling excluded and ostracised. On top of this, we must ensure we do more to support and maintain a connection

to the first-year students that audition but are not cast in shows. It can be disheartening and dejecting to not be cast in any productions in their first term, and we often see the same performers continuously cast each term as students decide not to get involved again after rejection at the beginning of their university experience. And for many this is down to the fact that the people getting involved are, for the most part, in the same group. “White cis community mainly”. Students don’t see enough of people like them in positions and roles within shows and the student workshop in general and so don’t feel like they could be involved. One example given talked about the tendency for SW productions to be heavily influenced by physical theatre and are clearly advertised in this way, so how can we ever expect anyone other than able-bodied actors to audition and be involved? If the Student Workshop is serious about promoting diversity and inclusivity throughout its work, these are the issues we must focus on, and commit to improving upon moving forward.

- **Ethan Chappell-Mason, SW Diversity Officer**

Closing Statement - Joshua Thomas, SW President

“Having read and taken time to reflect upon The Student Workshop’s opening diversity report, I can see both areas of promise and areas of improvement for the committee and myself to work on in the two coming terms of the year. The introduction of the diversity officer role in the student workshop was one that has been considered for a number of years, and after a meeting I attended in the summer with two of our past SW Presidents (Now RHUL graduates), we decided it was time to bring this role into the forefront of our committee, to ensure constant strides to building a more diverse, accessible and progressive company. One has to highlight the fantastic work and research that has been collated by our very first SW diversity officer Ethan Chappell-Mason, with aid from diversity facilitator Finn Saunders, in conducting our focus groups with past and present students alike, in order to get critical, honest, and progressive opinions from those who have been strongly tied to the SW over the course of the past few years. I’m incredibly pleased that the committee has recognised the need for feedback and constant analysis of how we programme our terms, including with the feedback we received from our fresher’s week surveys. This form of material gives us tangible evidence to reflect upon when curating and designing how we tailor our programming and events around the want and need of students in our community.

In reports likewise, it is not only important to suggest progressive targets and commitments, but also to recognise the strong works and diversification that has been more recently implemented in The Student Workshop. Our fantastic collaboration with the department on our ‘Black Lives, Black Words’ play readings, charity initiatives such as our Movember push for male’s mental health awareness, the mindful minute mental health installation, SW providing of free women's sanitary products in the department, and our international women's day event (Cancelled March 2020 due to the coronavirus). All of which have all been instrumental in our push to reach a wider audience and open ourselves up to be more inclusive to all. Last year, half of our SW Directors were representative of our LGBTQAI+ community. These are all brilliant projects/ results that lay foundations for a real progression in the face and programming for our company, but this can still be seen as only the beginnings of what we see as a complete overhaul in our programming, as we look to make every student that we see feel welcomed and included.

Although what we have seen in recent times is by all means an improvement, I see no reason not to increase the planning and the amount of these events and initiatives over the second half of my presidency. Moving forward, we can expect to see two charity initiatives in the next term. It strikes me that although we have seen a stronger representation of our LGBTQIA+ community in the student workshop, I would be interested in bringing further representation to our trans community in the department. This is something we hope to be able to plan events or initiatives for in the coming term. I also believe it is vital to continue with termly diversity reports. Even after this year, it is integral that whoever leads The Student Workshop is constantly analysing the programming and platforming of the company, to ensure that this does not slip. This is why we have decided to constitutionalise our termly diversity reports and the responsibilities of the SW Diversity officer, to ensure continuation in our push for diversity. For the following term, we intend on having a programming meeting prior to the first week to organise and propose a schedule plan for the term. After an incredibly difficult start to the year, we see it more integral that ever that we increase our first-year involvement and refashion our first year show slot to become more less isolating or intimidating. In order to do this, we propose to change from a team style bidding process to a more open style process where we as a committee vote and decide on a show for first years to perform. This way, we can tailor our contents of our termly programming to become more inclusive whilst this process is safely monitored by our more experienced students to ensure everything runs smoothly. We then propose that a panel of four students from our committee, two second years and two first years, interview first year students for a chance to be on the crew of this show team. When this is built, we then propose they audition their fellow first year students for the roles. This way, we can build and maintain a more progressive and inclusive first year process that aims to strike the balance between a microcosm of industry, whilst taking into consideration the needs of those first-year students in involving them in the company in whatever capacity possible, to further facilitate their growth as creatives. After our feedback sessions, we are also eager to bring more guest speakers into The Student Workshop to speak to the students and offer question and answer sessions in order to platform a more diverse range of voices on our termly programme, and offer invaluable advice to our young creatives that make up our company and department, respectively.

Although the inclusion of the diversity officer and our focus group reports was more than likely overdue, I am pleased that the need for a representative to platform a much wider range of voices has been met. The opening report has highlighted areas for improvement in The Student Workshop that we as a committee and as a community must now respond too. The committee and I are wholly invested in making The Student Workshop an inclusive place for all students, regardless of anything. For the coming term, we will constantly self-analyse and continue to gather the feedback and voices of our community, to bring more first year involvement, more MA involvement, and a wider array of voices from every corner of our PDA school community here at The Student Workshop, RHUL.”