

Mirroring

Actors like mirrors. (Although some joker keeps putting wrinkles and a chicken neck in mine.) We stare into them in dressing rooms, watch ourselves in them in dance class. We use them to practice bits, expressions, lines, dance steps.

Mirrors are important metaphorically. Our parents are supposed to mirror us. (Maybe that's where that chicken neck came from.) We ourselves are supposed to be a mirror to the audience. "Hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature," says the Bard. An audience should see itself reflected, should recognize itself onstage.

A play can mirror an audience even when the actors look completely different. I recently had the pleasure of seeing the Tupac Shakur musical "Holler If You Hear Me" and Mike Lew's play "Tiger Style." The worlds of urban blacks and super-achieving Asian Americans respectively are not my world; but I thoroughly enjoyed both pieces, and I identified with the struggles and anxieties, triumphs and failures of the characters.

I got to thinking about mirrors and the universal need to be mirrored a few weeks ago when, in the space of a couple days, I went to an entirely Asian American production of "Oliver!" by Baayork Lee's National Asian Artists Project, went to a dinner honoring the New York City chapter of the NAACP, and read the Kilroys' list of 46 women-authored plays recommended by playwrights, dramaturgs and artistic directors. What a blessing it would be if all the disparate elements of our polyglot culture saw themselves regularly on our nation's stages! It would not just create employment opportunities for the broadest array of our members; it would build audiences. (It thrilled me to see black audiences streaming into the Broadway revival of "A Raisin in the Sun.")

Actors' Equity has worked for decades to see that the diversity of our nation is reflected on our stages. Equity led the battle to integrate the National Theatre in Washington, DC. All our contracts have language promoting equal opportunity and prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, sexual orientation or gender identification.

Equity has long championed non-traditional casting, particularly where race or gender are not germane to the character. This approach can open up not only individual opportunities such as Nikki James's Eponine in "Les Miz" or Norm Lewis's Phantom or Chuck Cooper's producer in "Act One," but also entire casts such as the recent Broadway revivals of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "A Streetcar Named Desire" or Baayork's "Oliver!"

As a middle-class white male, I am keenly aware of the doors in our culture and society that I stroll blithely through, doors that are barely ajar or closed or even locked to others. I and the Association are committed to opening doors, to providing opportunities to all our members. We don't have hiring halls, we can't give anyone a job; what we can offer members is access and opportunity -- and sometimes only the pledge to keep fighting for access and opportunity.

That access and that opportunity benefit both sides of the mirror between audience and actor: more people see themselves physically represented onstage and audiences learn to see themselves in different physical representations. I firmly believe that this makes for a better mirror, one that serves both Art and Society. Now if we could just get rid of that chicken neck in my mirror.