

DeAnna M. Rowe

Diversity Statement

I would like to start this Diversity Statement by saying I celebrate human beings in all our wonderful presentations. I was raised believing that in our hearts we are all equal. We should judge a person by their actions and not by their skin color or nationality or sexual identity. We should embrace and celebrate our differences. However, we must acknowledge that we live and work in a society that has and continues to reward racism. Our institutions, be they political, educational, or business, are out of balance in regard to power structure and prosperity. We are socialized with implicit bias that is unavoidable. As much as we would like to say we are all equal in the United States regardless of race, gender, or any of the other protected identities, it isn't true. We are not all allowed the same privileges and advantages. It is true to say that we are diverse and to celebrate that diversity. Our main purpose in the Theatre is to tell stories about the human condition. This aspect of theatre naturally fosters empathy with and exploration of those who are different from us. I feel fortunate that I live and work in an atmosphere that is constantly striving to be more inclusive and equitable every day. We still have a lot of work to do in our institutions to try to establish more balance and heal inequalities.

In my personal journey navigating issues of diversity I am trying to be aware of my words and actions and how they affect others around me. I recognize my position as a faculty member and mentor to be one of authority with influence over the experience of others in my classroom and work spaces. I strive to approach this responsibility with an open mind, to establish trust, and maintain a level of humility when I make mistakes that hurt others.

My personal challenges with diversity were shown to me in subtle ways in my recent position at the University of Memphis. I was apprehensive when first moving to The South. As an avoider of conflict I was concerned that I would be uncomfortable with issues of racism in this city. I was in the minority in Memphis whose population is 29% White and 63% Black. Racism and equality are undercurrents of everything in Memphis. In this climate, and with a more diverse student body, I found myself questioning my ways of thinking as I had never done before. I had to become more conscious of my words and actions for fear of causing offense or being blind to implicit bias. I am a person who identifies herself as being inclusive, liberal and open-minded. I am grateful to this environment which held up a mirror for me to continue exploring my beliefs. I continue to become more aware of my own prejudices, and strive to overcome them with humility and grace.

This greater experience with diversity has affected my teaching and mentoring in several ways. It is my practice to include preferred pronouns in my email signature line and on syllabi. By introducing myself to my class in this manner I hope to show my students that they are safe expressing their binary or non-binary identity in the same manner. I strive for the inclusion of all varieties of peoples in my visual examples during lectures and presentations. If I am offering links to instructional videos that I have sourced online I make sure a variety of ethnicities and genders are shown as being experts in the subject. I use grading rubrics to remove any unconscious bias I have as I assess their work. I want to make sure that everyone is being graded fairly by me according to how well they complete a test or assignment.

I believe a way to move the diversity conversation forward is to provide guidance and infrastructure to student groups. Helping them organize and listening to their feedback and concerns is a starting point to making necessary changes in the way we communicate and function in our organizations.

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My presentation at the 2019 USITT conference entitled “Binding and Tucking: You Put What Where?!” delved into gender suppression practices that began in the Drag community and then found their way into the Trans community. I hoped to de-mystify these practices for costumers but also to understand the length people will go to to change their bodies. There is some danger in gender suppression techniques that I wanted to understand and avoid when costuming students. I enjoyed the glimpse at this vibrant, diverse community that this research allowed.

I will close by saying I believe we are all getting better. The fact that many institutions require a diversity statement is evidence to that fact. The United States seems to be more divided now than ever but I believe that is an illusion. We’ve always been divided. As a human race we have a long history of persecuting anyone who seemed to be “other”. It was a natural survival instinct. What I believe to be true is that as a society we are demanding more transparency for intolerance, bigotry, and inequality as we strive to see each other as part of the same tribe. This transparency serves to point out areas and issues needing improvement. I am hopeful for our future and constantly strive to work on my own acceptance and understanding of those who seem to be different from me.