

Legal Name

New Group Inc

Project Title

The New Group & Thomas Bradshaw want to see faces in the theater that reflect the multicultural cities where we work. We hope that by collaborating with students from diverse backgrounds, we can start changing the theater demographic

DDCF Grant Number

2013232

Project Progress and Successes

The goal of this artist-led collaboration with playwright Thomas Bradshaw (*Intimacy*, *Burning*) has been to give students from diverse backgrounds, with limited opportunities and economic barriers, the opportunity to see high-level professional theater and interact with the artists and theater community at large. In addition to exploring the question of why there are so few minorities in mainstream theater, we hope to build the next generation of audience members, theater makers, and non-profit leaders by offering the experience of live theater as a means of opening up the theater community.

We have worked most closely with students and faculty from Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn NY where, almost 84% of the students are Black, with a high percentage being female (74%), and come from families with a median income of \$30,192. Building upon this initiative, we expanded efforts to include students from Guttman Community College, part of the CUNY system where we have had an existing partnership since the school's creation in 2011. Guttman Community College is located in midtown Manhattan, where the students are primarily Black (25%) and Hispanic (55%), residing in the Bronx (31%), Brooklyn (25%), Queens (22%), and Manhattan (20%). Over 125 students and faculty from those colleges have attended performances of *ANNAPURNA* by Sharr White, *STICKS AND BONES* by David Rabe and *RASHEEDA SPEAKING* by Joel Drake Johnson. All students and faculty were given Metro Cards as part of the project to eliminate the cost of participation and refreshments were served before the show and during intermission (in the case of *STICKS AND BONES*).

These performances were followed by Talkbacks with Thomas Bradshaw or other members of The New Group community. Immediately following the show, a questionnaire was handed out to the students. Thomas Bradshaw created it so we would have consistency in the questions we asked. The answers have served as a marker but the true excitement came from the post-show Talkbacks when the students could react more viscerally to the discussion points guided by Thomas. The Talkback sessions provided a safe environment where students could express their reactions to the plays they saw and honestly explore the larger issues of racial diversity onstage in terms of the plays, actors on the stage, people in the audience and representatives from The New Group.

One of the interesting things about this project is that with the exception of one or two people, different students have attended each show. This exposure to an enjoyable evening of theater is valuable because of the ripple effect: these students may now choose to go to the theater again; they may talk about it with their friends and family, and regard it as an entertainment option thereby widening the reach of the project.

Thomas and The New Group were particularly thrilled with the RASHEEDA SPEAKING Talkback. The two lead actors in the play, Tonya Pinkins and Dianne Wiest, asked to take part in the discussion and made it a lasting memory for these students who were given access to famous artists -- a privilege that few audience members ever have the chance to experience.

This has been an exciting project that enlightened and empowered the students and faculty that took part, as well as members of the The New Group staff and community. Thomas and The New Group have made discoveries throughout this project and are taking the information we have gathered so far from the questionnaires and Talkbacks, to create strategies for diversifying and enriching the theater community. One thing we know, is that this has been an extremely valuable project, and while we are still learning how best to take this to the next step, we will be offering students from Medgar Evers College and Guttman community College the opportunity to see the THE SPOILS by Jesse Eisenberg, the final show in The New Group's 20th Anniversary season and also invite them to stay behind for a private Talkback and fill in the questionnaire to further educate the organization.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Our greatest obstacle was overcoming the internal bureaucracy inside the academic institution that had been excited to take part in the project at the time we made the proposal. Unfortunately participation in the project needed approval by many faculty members from several different departments and the internal bureaucracy halted the beginning of the project and caught us off-guard. We were lucky that we had an existing partnership with another CUNY College who were excited to take part.

Another obstacle was geographical. The distance from Medgar Ever College in Crown Heights, Brooklyn to The Pershing Square Signature Center on 42nd Street at 10th Avenue was a problem for some of the audience members who arrived late to the shows because the journey was not straightforward.

Another challenge was getting all the students to answer the questionnaires. We knew this might be the case but had hoped to have more than 50% return rate.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

No matter how much time you spend arranging details for the application, have a back-up plan. We put all our eggs in one basket and thus delayed the start of the project. Because we were unable to secure the presence of the intended college, we went down many other avenues, contacting student groups with Black and African American societies in the greater New York area. We quickly learned that without a direct contact, our email enquiries and phone messages were left unanswered. We wish, in hindsight, that we had expanded our original enquiries to include other colleges to participate so we weren't beholden to only one.

At two out of the three shows, we handed out souvenirs for the students to take away. The first time, the Dog Tags from STICKS AND BONES were given out at intermission. By the third show, The New Group rep was handing out RASHEEDA SPEAKING magnets when students handed in their questionnaires. It seemed to work as an incentive to complete them.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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