

Dear Muhlenberg Theatre Department,

We appreciate the professors who do care and have spoken about the current events related to racial injustice plaguing our communities, however, it is vital to come to a mutual understanding of the concrete ways that the department is adapting the curriculum and culture of Muhlenberg T&D in order to better serve all students, faculty, and staff. In this email I have attached a screenshot of a reply that a member of the community was sent by Charles Richter after asking if SMT would be making a statement about standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. We're emailing not just because of the email Charles Richter sent to a member of the community, we're emailing because we have seen the many biases that have occurred in theatrical season selections, auditions, casting and directorial choices in the past as well as in the theatre curriculum that should not go unvoiced.

This email is in an effort to understand and ignite conversations on how to concretely improve the department and larger community. We cannot improve the future if we do not reflect on our past. We want to address the issues your students have encountered during the 2019-2020 season. Muhlenberg students were encouraged to attend *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and after attending the show, it sparked an interesting conversation among students who paid attention to the cast and initial feminist agenda. Although we do not know the intentions of the director, no one can deny the fact that this show was an all-white cast. The one POC on the stage was an Assistant Stage Manager there to be silent, dressed as a servant, and moving furniture. This isn't the only time students saw the Baker, Empie, or Studio Theater stage with a predominantly white cast. *Into the Woods*, a musical that was double cast in the Fall of 2019, only managed to cast a few students of color and one of these students was cast as The Wolf, a distinctly predatory, animalistic character that unfortunately played into historical tropes of black and brown people being hypersexual and aggressive, particularly towards white women. These views were widely felt and discussed throughout the community following the performances, with many classes discussing the negative impact of this casting choice.

When Muhlenberg students see this time and time again, we undoubtedly start questioning whether or not Muhlenberg theatre professors are over-looking POC talent, turning to the default of casting White actors and/or giving into problematic tropes. What are the conversations being held during casting meetings about racial and color-conscious casting? Do these conversations ever take place? Who leads these conversations? And if these conversations are being held, is it done to ensure a person of color is in the play so you won't receive criticism? These are some of the questions your students ask themselves and the Theatre department should be asking as well. Students look to the department's choices as examples of how and what the theatre world/production/spaces should look like. We see your choices as examples for real-world applications. And if this is what students are being taught is acceptable then they will go out

into the world continuing to maintain and create unsafe spaces for actors, designers, stage managers, and more.

Muhlenberg students are all too aware of the lack of productions that centralize around the experiences of people of color. They are given one to two plays for the entire season, leaving artists of color scrambling to claim those opportunities, forcing them to create those opportunities for themselves, or simply giving up knowing they might not see change during their time at Muhlenberg. Although we are grateful for the recent production of *A Raisin in the Sun* put on to celebrate Black History Month and for hiring a Black director to lead it, this shouldn't be an exception or an irregular occurrence. At the end of the day, Black people exist outside of Black History Month. How are these decisions being made? How can you further dissect next season to learn how it directly impacts students of color?

We're grateful for the upcoming Black Feminist Performance class, the new curriculum for the incoming students, and the Theatre department taking action to provide classes surrounding the issues and experiences of people of color. But we want these classes and topics to be required for all theatre majors as you stated in your Facebook comments. We should **not** only rely on Leticia to educate students about non-eurocentric ideas and plays. All professors need to teach non-eurocentric theories and texts which is why there needs to be a more centralized curriculum that all professors teach, not just the ones who care about these different histories of theatre-making.

We **need** more professors of color, not just hired but consistently supported throughout their tenure at the school. It is also incredibly vital that all faculty and staff go through rigorous cultural competency and bias training so that they are much better resourced, ready for instruction, and can teach through culturally relevant teaching. This has been and is becoming more and more necessary since there are so few faculty of color and when incoming faculty members may have a history of insufficient sensitivity training and understanding of other's identities.

Although I am the one emailing now, many students have spoken out about these issues. Even some alumni have recently reached out and expressed disbelief that theatre students at Berg are still fighting the same battles they were facing six plus years ago. It is common for students to convene when professors are absent because we're afraid of possible repercussions or silencing from the department. We are tired of tip-toeing around the department for fear of potentially being "blacklisted." As educators, it's vital that you continuously do the research and address these issues yourselves. This is not hate towards the department, it's simply criticism. And, as you have taught us, the ability to accept constructive criticism is an important part of success in theatrical endeavors.

We hope that you will thoroughly read this message and provide to the community a concrete list of actions that will be taken in order to improve the curriculum and culture of the T&D Department at Muhlenberg beyond a simple

copy and paste from President Haring's statement, we deserve much more than that.

Sincerely,

Maereg Gebretekle with the support of the following students and alumni (See Attachment)