

# Change the STAGE

Can you imagine if artists were given their creative calling based solely on the color of their eyes or the size of their feet, with no regard for their individual qualities, skills or passions? Sounds ridiculous, right? Though I am proud and grateful to have been a “journeyman” working actor for my entire adult life, this is often what it feels like to me, as an actor of Asian American descent, when I am excluded from even getting into the room to be considered for roles (whose race/ethnicity/cultural background is not germane to a part) solely because of the shape of my eyes. I know that I’m far from alone. Let’s face it: showbiz is impossible, at best, for everyone. But wouldn’t it be amazing if we were all given a fair shot at finding our place in it?

We’ve made great strides with our work at Actors’ Equity in gaining more universal access to auditions, and implementing our philosophy that every single one of our 50,000 members is entitled to equal rights and an even playing field — but we need to go further in expanding perceptions of who we are and what we can do in order to make greater gains.

We need to find ways to help our industry stop defining actors of all stripes only by color of their skin, gender, age, sexual identification and/or disability — and to look more at our individual qualities and skills. We need to be leaders in driving home the point that inclusion is meant to expand the boundaries of the status quo, not take away from it; to expand our global perspective and reach, not take a bite out of whatever exists.

The bridges we build as storytellers — from page to stage, from actor to audience, from backstage to onstage, from culture to culture, from human to human — are at the center of why inclusion in the arts is vital. Without these bridges, we miss out on bringing the world’s many and varied aspects of humanity to life. With them, we learn what makes us different from each other, but most of all, what makes us simpatico. I am certain that when these bridges we build are inclusive of all of us, they are at the core of how we are able to shift the lens through which we see ourselves and each other. They are at the heart of how theatre can unite us and enrich us beyond measure.

I’m grateful to Equity’s Executive Director Mary McColl, President Kate Shindle, our Council, Board members, past and present chairs and vice chairs of the EEOC, and staff who continue to support the work we are doing toward making equality a priority for the Association, and toward having Actors’ Equity take a leadership role in creating a more diverse and inclusive industry. And I’m thankful for the members at large who have agreed to be profiled in this issue of *Equity News*, giving us a window on their individual experiences and perspectives. I hope that you will find their insight as interesting and valuable as I have. Of course, this is just a tiny sampling of our diverse and beautiful membership. This work is arduous and ongoing. But as certain as I am in my gratitude for my life in the theatre, I am certain that it is well worth fighting for *all* of us to be included in the American landscape of storytelling. We’re better and stronger for it.

To be continued.

In solidarity,  
Christine Toy Johnson  
National Chair, Equity News Advisory Committee  
National Chair, Equal Employment Opportunity Committee

