**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement**

As a long-time theatre practitioner, I see the classroom, the rehearsal room, and the stage, as a laboratory for collaborative discovery. Framing these spaces establishes active learning as foundational, but also assumes some risk for the students and for me as an instructor/director. All spaces, especially the classroom, include students who identify differently and come from varied backgrounds and lived experiences and potentially polarized points of view. I try to balance course content and artistic approach with the very specific needs of the individuals and how they identify at the forefront. Some of the most important lessons I have learned about teaching, working, and directing students have occurred in moments when my prepared content revealed itself to be insufficient to respond to my students’ needs. In those moments my willingness to transform and evolve my own perspectives, while never losing sight of overall learning goals, was essential to success.

One noteworthy example of this occurred in my 2016 Acting the Song course while considering song selection for a “miscast” project, a project in which I have long relied on to challenge my students regarding issues of race, gender, sexuality, privilege, and power. It wasn’t until that spring, however, that I was forced to re-examine this project with fresh eyes, specifically with my non-binary, genderqueer and transgender students in mind. Acknowledging that, as a cis-gendered white male, my privilege and implicit bias limits my ability to anticipate the needs of all my current students and their perspectives, I consulted with a colleague who identifies as genderqueer and one of my dear alumni, now a prominent activist as a trans femme actor/author, to develop a new approach to the project allowing space for a growing population in the class.  My conversations with them led to framing the criteria for song selection around avoiding erasure and thinking about song selection outside of “the binary.” Having already established our classroom as a brave and mutually respectful learning environment, I decided to throw out my prepared content and instead focus on the notion of how cross-gendered song selection for cis-gendered performers could be perceived as erasing opportunity for an underrepresented group of actors. We began to explore approaches to song selections from more typically accepted best practices around race, cultural sensitivities, now considering identity politics and implicit bias. This new frame helped all of us start to see how examining our choices differently around gender and identity has an impact not only on author intent when crossing gender, but also on inclusion and avoidance of erasure. Instantly, what had previously been a fun, frankly “carrot” project transformed into a meaningful, albeit messy, relevant, and now indispensable project that consistently results in class discussions that allow my students to explore the construct of gender with complexity and nuance, citing specific examples from their lived experiences as well as their reactions to the experience working on the project. Not all choices are ever universally applauded. Some students are angered by the choices their peers still make but, within the classroom, all voices are welcomed, and everyone expresses their perspectives. When such differences are articulated with respect, openness, and an earnest desire to learn, the result is powerful and more productive.

More than simply forcing me to change a few assignments, this experience transformed my notion of leadership and inclusion in the classroom. Although I was not relinquishing my agency and responsibility in the room, my students were encouraged to take the lead in articulating the focus of our work and this action bled into subsequent class discussions. What started as recognizing my own limitations led to robust class sessions, an empowered group of students, and a collegiate partnership that transformed my stand-alone course into a learning community. This in turn, has led to closer examinations of the inevitable binary nature of much of the Pre-Golden Age and Golden Age musical theatre literature.

I am dedicated to finding ways to empower my students, especially those who feel their needs have been ignored by traditional pedagogy and practices. I am dedicated to finding creative solutions focused on student desires in our ever-changing environments. And I believe that inclusion – whether it be at the classroom, departmental, or university level – needs to provide ways for communities of color (and others whose needs have too often been ignored in university settings) to lead. I am unafraid to make a mess as we muddle together to forge a stronger understanding of each other and what diversity on every level brings to artistic endeavors. As educators, we must empower our students to show us where our blind spots lie. Teaching is a transformative act. In the best instances both students and instructors are indelibly changed by their work together, not merely in terms of knowledge gained, but in terms of perspectives altered. This happens best in a diverse community of thinkers where instructors not only demand mutual respect among their students, but also provide concrete challenges that forces all participants to confront preconceived notions about themselves and their collaborators, redefining their self-imposed limitations.

I continue to subscribe to the mantra, “Diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. Belonging is an outcome.” I am committed to actively changing my training methods to understand my own privilege and bias while recognizing diverse identities, practicing innovative inclusion, and promoting that we all belong in the collaborative world that is the theatre.