

THEATER

Diverse paths for dismantling white hierarchies

LILY
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When TheatreFirst announced last month that its white leader, Jon Tracy, would step down from his role to create a pipeline for new leaders of color, his voluntary relinquishing of power was recognized as a rare move.

But it is far from the only way a local arts organization has moved to address and eliminate hierarchical white leadership.

One famous example dates back 50 years, when the San Francisco Mime Troupe, having already restructured itself as a collective, intentionally diversified the company's membership.

Joan Holden, who started writing for the Troupe in 1967 and left in 2000, remembers that the company realized its need for diversity when it joined picket lines during the 1971 International Longshore and Warehouse Union strike.

"It didn't take us long to notice that we were all white and the longshoremen were mostly Black," she says. "This was the first experience of our audience looking different from us, and we decided we needed to look like our audience. And not just look. We needed to be the same people as the audience. You couldn't preach against racism if you were all white."

Gradually, artists of color joined the collective: Lonnie Ford, Deb'borá Gilyard, Este-



Josie Norris / The Chronicle 2019

The San Francisco Mime Troupe, long structured as a collective, presented "Treasure Island" last July 4 at Dolores Park.

ban Oropeza, Maria Acosta. The new voices helped expand the range of stories the company could tell.

But even then, the Troupe realized its work wasn't done. A few years later, Holden recalls, "we determined that we wouldn't take any more white people" after Ford argued that white members, because they were the majority, ran the company. "You couldn't deny it," she says.

The Troupe also decided no member of a particular demographic should have to be the only one represented. To this day, the collective of roughly a dozen remains racially diverse, not via a formal quota system but through more organic means, says Michael Gene Sullivan, who joined the collective in 1991.

"Since the plays are very much about the world as it is,

we're working with a diverse group of actors and writers and designers all the time, so those are the people we draw from," he says. "We don't have to step aside and go, 'Oh goodness, we need this person,' because we've worked with these people."

In recent years, other local arts organizations, including California Shakespeare Theater and Z Space, have moved toward what are termed distributive leadership models, in which the authority and responsibilities of leadership are shared.

"There's a huge spectrum of what includes distributive leadership," says Emiko Ono, program director of performing arts at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has studied Cal Shakes' and other companies' leadership models. "On one

end there's the collective, where there's many people weighing in on every decision and there's very little hierarchy. ... On the far end of the spectrum, you may have a co-leadership model. And there's so many things in between."

At Cal Shakes and Z Space, staff members' titles alone suggest they resemble many other local theater companies. What's different is more nuanced, said consultant Michael Courville, who worked with Hewlett on its leadership report: What does workplace culture feel like? How do workers interact with each other? Is time built in for difficult conversations? Who gets to make meaningful decisions?

For the arts industry as a whole, distributive leadership can offer more opportunities

for a younger generation of leaders than might a traditional hierarchical model, where there are only one or two leadership roles per organization.

At Cal Shakes, the company's commitment to racial justice led to questions about its hierarchical structure. Distributive leadership, says Artistic Director Eric Ting, might allow a company to better harness the activism of artists.

With the field's movement toward racial equity, he says, "you see a lot of that happening on stages and with artists who, for better or worse, are what I would describe as temporary employees. You bring them in for the production, and they're there for the four weeks, and then they're gone. There's often no reason

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for them to hold an organization or a theater accountable for their behaviors and their practices.”

In other words, give those artists some leadership powers, and the incentives change.

In April, Hope Mohr Dance announced it was moving toward a distributive leadership model, also for reasons of racial justice. Cherie Hill, who's Black, and Karla Quintero, a Latina, now lead the organization along with its white founder, Hope Mohr. The trio now co-curate and direct the Bridge Project, the company's flagship annual program.

Mohr says the move, long in the making, was accelerated by “Dancing Around Race” choreographer Gerald Casel's year-long residency with the company in 2018.

“I started to feel very aware and uncomfortable with this disconnect between our internal structure and our equity-driven public programs,” Mohr says.

The company's website still lists Mohr as artistic director, with Hill as director of art in community and Quintero as director of marketing and development. But those titles may be in flux.

“We're in the process of teasing all that out and really articulating what the model looks like,” Mohr says.

Just months in, says Quintero, the company's new model looks like “more questions and more learning.” It also means “a lot more CCing each other on emails,” Hill says, with a laugh. Decisions as basic as a brochure's design can take more time — adjustment to which can be a struggle in the nonprofit world, where time and money often feel scarce.

But already, the group sees positive changes that they attribute to the new structure.



Tim Hussin / Special to The Chronicle 2014

Joan Holden says the Mime Troupe realized its need for diversity when members picketed during the 1971 dockworkers strike.

The selection process for its prestigious Community Engagement Residency will involve more artists next year, they say. As for this fall's Bridge Project, Mohr says, “when you bring multiple voices in to curate, that helps to move away from this single standard for aesthetic value, which I think is so crucial to the evolution of the field.”

One asset of distributive leadership is that Mohr doesn't have to leave the company for it to pursue racial justice, the trio say.

“I'm still not sure if decentering whiteness means omitting whiteness,” says Hill. For now, “Hope is still, as a white woman, a part of the process, but has had to really give space to let other voices be heard.”

Mohr says she is exploring how to sacrifice some control “without disengaging from the work.” She says she finds problematic any framing that

suggests the promotion of a leader of color is “somehow a loss for white people.”

“One habitual white response to perceived challenges to power is just to withdraw, and to disengage, and to disconnect, to leave the space entirely,” Mohr says. “I'm curious about what it means to stay in these difficult conversations.”

And withdrawing, says Quintero, can mean “leaving all this work for other people to do.”

The real work of restructuring, she adds, doesn't occur in the single act of an appointment of an artist of color.

“That is the gesture,” Quintero says, “but really, the conversations are the work.”

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Nick Otto / Special to The Chronicle

Mime Troupe member Michael Gene Sullivan rehearses the radio serial “Tales of the Resistance” at the Troupe's office.



Chani Bockwinkel

Karla Quintero is one of three co-leaders of Hope Mohr Dance, moving toward a distributive leadership model.