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## Casting Policy

### Department Productions

When selecting and casting shows in our season, the University of Utah's Department of Theatre aims to adopt and model practices that are equitable and inclusive, and that honor diverse experiences and identities. At one time, this meant adopting a “color-blind” approach to casting. In 2016, we formally recognized that color-blind casting failed to reckon with the realities of a racist and sexist society; so we articulated a color- and gender-conscious casting policy. With the events of the past several years, we have come to realize the limits of this policy, too, and we are widening the lens to adopt an approach that director Lavina Jadhvani refers to as “[identity-conscious](#).”<sup>1</sup>

Identity-conscious casting does *not* mean that only a person whose identity exactly aligns with the identity of a character may play that role. It *does* mean that we recognize and value both “the givens of the text *and* the givens of how this group of artists identify” (Jadhvani). What does it mean to value these givens? It means that we spend time investigating how they intersect at all points of the process, from play selection through casting and rehearsal to closing night.

While selecting shows, we commit to the careful examination of each text in the context of the following “givens”:

- the specific educational needs, strengths, numbers, and identities of all our student-artists,
- the availability of necessary, relevant experts in intimacy, culture, stage violence, and sensitive subject matter,
- the demands on our technical staff and how that will overlap with the demands placed on them by other departments at different times of year,
- anticipated production costs and funding availability.

Before auditions, the Season Selection Committee and directors share information with student actors about the “non-negotiables” of each show (for example, a stage kiss or stage violence that is essential to telling the story or the ability to belt a D5). In addition, they share information about any casting requirements outlined by playwrights (for example, a certain role must be played by a non-binary actor).

During the audition process, actors are invited to share information about their comfort level and boundaries regarding theatrical intimacy, stage violence, and additional content that might influence casting (like objecting to the use of strong language). Actors are also invited to share information about their identity that may be important to them (like pronouns) or relevant to

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<sup>1</sup> Lavina Jadhvani. Identity-Conscious Work: a working definition. March 26, 2021.  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TAYtiS8Z8NS8itngwyyH4SZQiX7KOnU1igAzNHRtQNY/edit>

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casting a particular role (for example, coming from a specific cultural background represented in the play).

Does this mean that anyone can play any role in our season? The short answer is no.

We will continue to honor the stated intentions of playwrights, especially with regard to casting actors from historically underrepresented or excluded communities. When a script requires that a role be played by an actor from a particular underrepresented group, we will work diligently to cast actors in alignment with those requirements. If a show under consideration requires that the department seek actors from off-campus, the selection committee will weigh the potential benefits of working with a guest artist, the learning opportunities offered by working with this particular script, and the context of the rest of the season (e.g., total number of roles available). Ultimately, if the department cannot meet the casting requirements of the script, we will not select that play for production.

If a playwright has *not* stated that a role must be played by an actor with a particular identity or background, our efforts will always be to honor the story being told through deep dramaturgical engagement with the text.

### **Class Work**

The American Musical and Dramatic Academy's "[Philosophy and Standards Regarding Casting Practices](https://www.amda.edu/news/amdas-philosophy-and-standards-regarding-casting-practices)"<sup>2</sup> provides a starting place for us to reconsider our classroom casting practices. As AMDA's philosophy document points out, the entertainment industry's reliance on "type" for casting has resulted in the exclusion of a multitude of performers from many major roles. AMDA has gone so far as to adopt the following policy: "ALL roles will be available to any actor whose performance can maintain the integrity of the story and who can believably inhabit the character." The exception to this rule "is with material that has been written specifically for BIPOC artists." Leaving aside the fact that "believability" is subjective and the question of whether other exceptions should also be carved out (e.g., for transgender artists), we appreciate the opportunities for learning such an open approach offers in an educational setting.

Like AMDA, we urge faculty and students to discard traditional casting practices in the classroom, and to embrace an approach that is led instead by meeting learning objectives. If the goal of a particular course is oriented toward the development of technique, then casting (by an instructor) or selecting (by a student) a role "should NOT rely upon alignment with perceptions of how that role is 'usually' or 'was meant to be' played." Instead, *the selection of material should support the development of specific techniques, skills, or understandings.*

There are classes and assignments that are aimed at preparing emerging artists to enter the entertainment industry. In such cases, we encourage open discussion of how to prepare for

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<sup>2</sup> Published July 2020. <https://www.amda.edu/news/amdas-philosophy-and-standards-regarding-casting-practices>

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encounters with industry professionals who continue to harbor more traditional ideas about casting.

When casting or selecting material for class work, we urge all members of the community to enter discussions with curiosity and questions. If a faculty member casts a student in a role for class work and the student feels uncomfortable with it, the faculty member should listen to the student's concerns. Once the faculty member understands those concerns, the student and faculty member can decide whether selecting different material would be appropriate. Likewise, if a student selects material that the faculty member sees as inappropriate for some reason, they should open a conversation with the student, perhaps asking what it is they connect to in that particular role.

Students, of course, may observe peers' class work that does not align with their own expectations or perceptions of how a role "should be played." Here, too, we suggest that students approach their peers and faculty with open hearts and minds. There may be reasons for selecting a particular piece that are not immediately apparent to the casual observer. If a selection is troubling to a member of the class, students are encouraged to initiate an open conversation about the choice of material.

Ultimately, there may not be perfect agreement on the selection or casting of a particular role. Reasoned disagreement is a legitimate part of creative and intellectual practices.

Casting is not a math problem. And identity is not singular.

The policy outlined above will inevitably change over time as we learn, err, reexamine our processes, and grow.

We are trying to bend the arc of (theatre) history toward justice. Obviously, we have not yet succeeded. But it is worth the effort.