



**How Do You Solve a Problem Like Institutional Racism?:
Producing *The Wiz* in Hostile Territory**

By Allison Gibbes

On the evening of June 17, 2015, the company and I left the first rehearsal of GLOW Lyric Theatre’s summer season in Greenville, South Carolina. When we unsilenced our smart phones, the news notifications began. There had been a shooting in Charleston, less than three hours away. Although first reports were vague, by morning we learned that a man had opened fire during a prayer meeting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, killing nine black parishioners. With witness statements and security footage, police quickly identified twenty-one-year-old Dylann Roof as the primary suspect. A manhunt spanning both North and South Carolina commenced, and South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley held a press conference to announce that Roof had been apprehended during a traffic stop. Haley held back tears, declaring “We woke up today and the heart and soul of South Carolina [was] broken.”¹ As GLOW’s dramaturg and, incidentally, a South Carolina native, I found myself embroiled in a watershed moment in the state’s racial history. Our summer musicals, *The Wiz* and *The Hot*

¹ Erik Ortiz and F. Brinley Bruton, “Charleston Church Shooting: Suspect Dylann Roof Captured in North Carolina,” *NBC News*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/charleston-church-shooting/charleston-church-shooting-suspect-dylann-roof-captured-north-carolina-n377546>.

Mikado, became increasingly controversial as underlying racial aggressions and tensions in the state of South Carolina broke open. *The Wiz* became GLOW's intervention in a volatile community. Using this production as a case study, I argue that popular musical theatre can potentially intercede in historically oppressive social structures through diverse community building and positive representation.

Underneath radical acts of racialized violence such as the AME church shooting, institutionalized racism functions invisibly within a community to create an environment that supports extreme prejudice. Constructions of community are powerful, but they are also malleable. Anthony Smith identifies the formation of modern community as a response to the "corroded individuality" that has arisen with the development of capitalism and bureaucracy.² Belonging to a community helps to combat "powerful feelings of estrangement and homelessness [. . . as well as] feelings of fragmentation."³ In the press conference on June 18, Governor Haley spoke about pain, healing, and civic pride, averring, "We are a strong and faithful state. We love our state, we love our country, and most importantly we love each other. . . . The people of South Carolina need us to come together and be strong for what has happened."⁴ Haley invokes community unification as a source of healing. Belonging in an acquired community functions as a safety and survival mechanism across the animal kingdom.

But creating an exclusive community of belonging necessitates the construction of the outsider. Increasingly homogenized societies nurture racial dysfunction and prejudice. Communities of belonging manifest and define themselves not only through physical and

² Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York: Blackwell, 1987), 175.

³ Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, 175.

⁴ Ortiz and Bruton, "Charleston Church Shooting."

geographical togetherness but also must constantly adapt and refresh the parameters of belonging culturally through rhetoric, mythology, and representation. Communities reinforce and reify themselves through rehearsal. Disruption of exclusive community structures requires the conscious creation and rehearsal of inclusive communities, and theatre offers a potential site to do this.

Indoctrination into an acquired community occurs not only socially but also neurologically. Immersion in a community's culture, rhetoric, and mythology erects a reference framework in the neurotypical brain. This framework functions as a mechanism for instantaneous judgments. Identifying a perceived threat triggers a fight-or-flight response in the amygdala, which leads to fear, aggression, and often racialized violence.⁵ In a racially dysfunctional community, these neural mechanisms work interdependently with popular representation and biased social structures to constantly renew, reify, and sanction prejudice. For instance, when George Zimmerman shot unarmed Trayvon Martin in 2012, he justified the killing by identifying Martin, a young black teen in a hoodie, as a "suspicious person."⁶ Although several subsequent protests involved activists mimicking Martin's look to demonstrate that a sweatshirt is just a sweatshirt, the hoodie serves as just one component of the twenty-first-century incarnation of the dangerous young black man construct. Popular representations of the demonized black male feed the neural reference frameworks of consumers, and repeated exposure shapes both conscious and unconscious prejudices.

⁵ Mary E. Wheeler and Susan T. Fiske, "Controlling Racial Prejudice: Social-Cognitive Goals Affect Amygdala and Stereotype Activation," *Psychological Science* 16, no. 1 (2005): 56-73.

⁶ "Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts," *CNN*, May 23, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/>.

Zimmerman's subsequent acquittal reinforced institutionalized anti-black racism by deeming it socially and legally permissible to designate a person as a threat simply for being black, male, and wearing a hood. Systemic prejudices manifest in people of all races—not only in overt violence, but in micro-aggressions, systemic racism, and internalized shame. Popular representation teaches audiences whose lives have value.

In the plastic brain, however, the structures that autonomously identify social categorizations and perceived threats are highly adaptable.⁷ The case of Dylann Roof demonstrates the pliability of human prejudice. Evidence suggests that Roof's militant racism developed in his late teens and early adulthood. In fact, his childhood peers and teachers remember him as a kid who interacted peacefully with non-white classmates and had multiracial friends. Taliaferro Robinson-Heyward, who is black, recalls, "To me, in the seventh grade, he saw black just as he saw white."⁸ This changed when Roof withdrew from school and his school-based community. He found a new society of white supremacists on the internet. Immersion in neo-Nazi rhetoric and the power of communal belonging was life-altering to someone who had become disenfranchised. The myths and representations of African Americans that Roof found on white power websites fueled his 2,500-word manifesto arguing for racial violence and segregation.⁹ When Dylann Roof murdered nine black churchgoers, he was attempting to start a race war. This implies a drastic shift in Roof's neural reference framework and demonstrates the centrality of constructed communities in creating structures

⁷ Roberta Sellaro et al., "Reducing Prejudice Through Brain Stimulation," *Brain Stimulation* 8, no. 5 (2015): 891-897.

⁸ Frances Robles and Nikita Stewart, "Dylann Roof's Past Reveals Trouble at Home and School," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/us/charleston-shooting-dylann-roof-troubled-past.html?_r=0.

⁹ Roof posted his manifesto on his website, lastrhodesian.com. The title refers to Rhodesia, a South African apartheid state. Many news articles reference the site, but it was removed shortly after Roof's arrest.

of belonging.¹⁰ Representation—especially popular representation—plays a key role in changing the internalized attitudes that reinscribe systematized racism. Therefore, as popular entertainment, musical theatre provides a method for intervention through representation.

Cultural/Historical Context

South Carolina has a troubled racial history. The narrative of the Confederate battle flag in the state encapsulates the role of institutionalized racism in the cultivation of anti-black violence. After the Emmanuel AME church shooting, the Confederate flag, a predominant symbol in Dylann Roof's racist iconography, became a locus of contention. For fifty-four years, the Confederate battle flag has flown over the South Carolina State House in Columbia and served as a symbol of the systematized racism that allowed white supremacy such as Roof's to fester unchallenged.¹¹ Hordes of Southerners have repeatedly defended the Confederate flag as "heritage not hate." This motto, created by the Ku Klux Klan and appropriated into popular vernacular, reformulates the flag as a harmless vestige of Southern pride from the Civil War era. Between 1992 and 2001, the University of North Carolina conducted biannual polls showing that 86.9 percent of white South Carolinians claimed that the flag represented Southern identity rather than racial conflict. Only 10 percent of black citizens agreed with this assertion.¹² In fact, the flag was not actually raised over the State House until 1962. South Carolina supposedly erected the banner to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the Civil War.

¹⁰ Robles and Stewart, "Dylann Roof's Past Reveals Trouble."

¹¹ Linsey Davis, "Woman Who Removed Confederate Flag at SC Statehouse: 'Enough is Enough,'" *ABC News*, July 2, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/woman-removed-confederate-flag-sc-statehouse/story?id=32176372>.

¹² Scott H. Huffmon, H. Gibbs Knotts, and Seth C. McKee, "Down with the Southern Cross: Opinions on the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina," *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (December 27, 2017): 719.

But it remained raised in South Carolina (as well as Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi) as a symbol of resistance against desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement. The continued display of the flag on government property has served as an emblem of state-sanctioned racism, silently asserting white superiority.¹³

To Roof and many other white supremacists, the flag has become symbolic of an exclusive community of belonging that supersedes the United States. In the *New York Times*, Francis Robles describes images on Roof's website in which he "spat on and burned the American flag but waved the Confederate."¹⁴ Neurologically, the Confederate flag represents a toxic bias framework that categorizes people of color as extreme threats. In a profile on Roof, *CNN* cites his website, on which he rants:

I have no choice. I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the world, and I guess that has to be me.¹⁵

Roof, who represented himself in the penalty phase of his trial, asserted in his closing argument, "I felt like I had to do it, and I still do feel like I had to do it."¹⁶ He continued to voice this sentiment consistently in his writings from prison. Roof's attempt to start a race war under the banner of the Confederate flag brought the already controversial symbol into the center of a heated public debate.

¹³ Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee, "Down with the Southern Cross," 719.

¹⁴ Frances Robles, "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto are Posted on Website," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html>.

¹⁵ Ray Sanchez and Ed Payne, "Charleston church shooting: Who is Dylann Roof?," *CNN*, December 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting-suspect/>.

¹⁶ Khushbu Shah and Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Victim's dad warns Dylann Roof: 'Your creator . . . he's coming for you,'" *CNN*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/11/us/dylann-roof-sentencing/index.html>.

Many South Carolinians expressed outrage over the flag's place of honor over the State House. After Roof's arrest, citizens and legislators attempted to begin conversations about racism by demanding the removal of the Confederate flag from the State House. On July 7, 2015, one activist, Brittany Newsome, scaled the flagpole before a gathered crowd and removed the flag herself as an act of protest performance art. She was arrested and charged with defacing a monument, but crowdfunding sources quickly raised money to cover her bail and fines. The flag had represented an intensely polarizing issue in the state of South Carolina. In fact, 2015 was not the first time protesters had fought to remove the flag. Before 2000, a much larger version flew underneath the country and state flags on the spire over the State House. After protests by civil rights activists demanding the removal of the flag, state legislation compromised by posting a smaller one on a separate flag pole as part of a memorial. Removal of the flag was not a simple matter. The Southern Heritage Act, passed in 2000 along with the compromise on the flag's repositioning, protected its place over the State House by requiring a two-thirds majority vote before making any changes to the memorial.¹⁷

As Governor Nikki Haley prepared to sign a bill forcing the removal of the flag, a North Carolina chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, which claimed to be the largest KKK chapter in the United States, planned a rally on the State House steps in Columbia to protest the flag's removal. On the day of the rally, the KKK members and supporters were met with backlash from the New Black Panther Party, and several fights erupted between the two groups. This raw violence

¹⁷ Tom Foreman, "Why the Confederate flag still flies in South Carolina," *CNN*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/south-carolina-confederate-flag-still-flies/>.

exposed the volatile race relations at the core of South Carolinian regional identity.¹⁸ The race-fueled anger permeated the state through smaller acts of aggression. In Greenville, we saw these tensions in action as pro-Confederate supporters raised the flag aggressively on homes and businesses. Several rigged enormous Confederate flags on the backs of their trucks that flapped threateningly at pedestrians and passing vehicles. On television, we watched in tentative celebration as Governor Haley, backed by both Republican and Democratic legislators, oversaw the final lowering of the Confederate flag over the State House on July 10, 2015. This act delegitimized the banner as an official symbol of government-approved institutional racism, but it reinforced the flag's status as an insignia of rebellion. The antagonistic flag-waving of furious citizens clearly demarcated people and spaces that were unsafe for people who were not white.

GLOW Lyric Theatre

The sprawling, conservative city of Greenville, South Carolina, is a little richer and whiter than most in the state.¹⁹ Artistic Director Jenna Tamisea (who received her MFA in directing at Florida State University and is the director of the Converse Opera Theatre at Converse College) and Executive Director Christian Elser (who earned his DMA in voice at the University of Kansas and works as an associate professor at Presbyterian College) founded GLOW Lyric Theatre in 2009. The company produces musical theatre, light opera, and devised musical works with an

¹⁸ Craig Stanley and Elisha Fieldstadt, "KKK, Black Panther Group Clash Over Confederate Flag Outside South Carolina Capitol," *NBC News*, July 18, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/confederate-flag-furor/south-carolinians-urged-ignore-ugly-opposing-confederate-flag-rallies-capitol-n394401>.

¹⁹ "QuickFacts: Greenville County, South Carolina," *United States Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/greenvillecountysouthcarolina/PST045216>.

emphasis on vocal performance. Their mission, which Tamisea describes as social justice musical theatre, uses the popular medium as a locus for discussion about social issues and to inspire empathy for oppressed groups. GLOW works to tailor their messages to speak specifically to the city of Greenville, a city steeped in South Carolina's racist history.

In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005), Raymond Knapp asserts that musical theatre serves as an especially effective site for the development of nationalism and community "since what happen[s] onstage not only [brings] a specific audience together within a constructed community, but also [sends] that audience out into a larger community armed with songs to be shared."²⁰ Tamisea concurs, adding that "the American musical theatre can play a pivotal role in bringing empathy and understanding to a community."²¹ Elser adds, "We feel that theatre is a perfect medium to allow understanding to flow between people of all backgrounds. It also has tremendous healing properties, for the same reasons."²² GLOW began to lean toward its social justice mission during the 2014 summer season with their productions of *Rent* and *La Bohème*, which used the works to broach issues of prejudice against the LGBTQ+ communities.

The company's purpose solidified in the 2015 summer season. While Tamisea and Elser began to plan the season, Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed teen Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The subsequent formation of the Black Lives Matter Movement began to bring mainstream attention to the long history of violent death that has resulted from

²⁰ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

²¹ Jenna Tamisea (Artistic Director, GLOW) and Christian Elser (Executive Director, GLOW), interview, December 2016.

²² Tamisea and Elser, interview.

systematized racism in the United States. On April 4, 2015, Officer Michael Slager shot and killed Walter Scott in North Charleston, which was only three hours away.²³ Graphic video footage, filmed on a bystander's cell phone, showed Slager shooting eight rounds into the unarmed man's back as Scott tried run away. With this event occurring so close to home, GLOW's executive and creative team became determined to use their summer season as a vehicle to address local racism and to assert that Black Lives Matter in the South Carolina and Greenville communities. Tamisea and Elser sought to assemble a diverse community of artists by offering jobs to performers, designers, and technicians of color, providing a platform to amplify multicultural voices.

Tamisea and Elser, who are both white, implored the multiracial company to bring their own experiences and perspectives to the table. *Hot Mikado* (see Figure 1) adapts Gilbert and Sullivan's most popular operetta, *The Mikado*. With a modified script, a multicultural cast, and an added syncopation to the otherwise (mostly) intact Gilbert and Sullivan score, *Hot Mikado* (1986) spins the operetta into a piece that mocks the cultural appropriation of the original. The musical arrangements commemorate the style of 1920s-era Cotton Club performers and reference the legacy of black jazz artists of the Harlem Renaissance. As Josephine Lee illuminates in *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado*, the show "celebrates the triumph of African American performers. . . . Through this geographical and musical relocation, *Hot Mikado's* racial politics become redefined around the jubilant inclusion

²³ Laurel Wamsley, "Former S.C. Police Officer Pleads Guilty in Shooting of Walter Scott," *NPR*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/05/02/526580300/former-s-c-police-officer-pleads-guilty-in-shooting-of-walter-scott>.

of African Americans in the American racial landscape.”²⁴



Figure 1: Tyler Pirrung (Ko-Ko) and Mingo Xerron (Pooh-Bah) in *Hot Mikado* at GLOW Lyric Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Stephen Boatwright, Permissions: GLOW)

The Wiz (see Figure 2) transforms Frank L. Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* into a tale about a young black girl in urban Kansas City. The show uses the original novel as source material, but it responds to the 1939 film starring Judy Garland (by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg), which has become iconic in popular culture. The structure and song placement mimic the Arlen/Harburg version “with some telling differences.”²⁵ In *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Stacy Wolf explains, “*The Wiz* follows its movie source in plot, character, and structure, [but] it jettisons Harold Arlen’s Tin Pan Alley and Broadway-style score for soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, and funk. The transformation from white Hollywood musical to black

²⁴ Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Mikado* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxi.

²⁵ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle loc. 2193.

Broadway incorporates a new vocabulary of speech, song, and movement.”²⁶ *The Wiz* offered a story that celebrated blackness during the racially turbulent 1970s.



Figure 2: Tierney Breedlove (Aunt Em), Tanisha Moore (Dorothy), and Sophie (Toto) in *The Wiz*, GLOW Lyric Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Stephen Boatwright, Permissions: GLOW)

Both *The Wiz* and *Hot Mikado* twist canonical and traditionally white-centered narratives into stories that celebrate people of color and their art. As adaptations, they expose cultural appropriation, exotification, and the erasure of people of color in both their source material and throughout the history of popular musical theatre. If prejudices form neurologically through exposure to popular culture, these two musicals work toward countering racialized stereotypes and replacing them with celebratory representations. As Warren Hoffman proclaims in *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical*, mainstream musical theatre tends to depict a “sense of community and utopic promise” while

²⁶ Wolf, *Changed for Good*, loc. 2193.

simultaneously omitting or marginalizing people of color.²⁷ He adds, “Plainly put, the history of the American musical is the history of white identity in the United States.”²⁸ By placing people of color at the forefront, both musicals challenge the homogenized, white-centric narrative and emphasize black representation. Moreover, they offer joyous rather than tragic representations of African American people and culture. While *The Wiz* and Gilbert and Sullivan may not seem like the most controversial choices, the conservative South Carolina city rarely sees stage representations that reflect the diversity of its inhabitants.

***The Wiz*: A Case Study**

On the day after the church shooting in Charleston, we began a rehearsal period that Tamisea describes as “fraught with grief, attempted healing, and a strong perseverance from a cast and team who were determined to create a safe space and start a dialogue about our broken state.”²⁹ Before the start of the second rehearsal, cast and crew members hugged and cried, shared their thoughts and fears, and offered prayers. We couldn’t know at the time how racial tensions would build and explode across the state over the course of our season. GLOW Choreographer Maurice Sims, who is African American, expressed his concerns and fears in a June 30 Facebook post, stating, “Being in South Carolina right now, this is especially scary. I still don’t know how some find it in their hearts to still fight for the room to hate and discriminate . . . but what I DO know is that love wins and will keep winning.” Tamisea admits that she began to have doubts, confessing, “There were several moments when I wondered if we could go on

²⁷ Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2014), 6.

²⁸ Hoffman, *The Great White Way*, 3.

²⁹ Tamisea and Elser, interview.

with the season. I wondered if it was even safe, if we would even make a difference. . . . While the KKK marched on our state capital, and Confederate flag parades flooded our streets, we produced black musical theatre to show our community that Black Lives Matter in our state.”³⁰

In the summer of 2015 in Greenville, South Carolina, as the infected roots of racism became exposed, representation that glorified blackness was radical. When *The Wiz* opened forty years earlier on Broadway in 1975, it was also radical. *The Wiz* offered theatre that was written by African Americans and featuring all-black voices, and it was kept alive by a primarily black audience.³¹ At the time, the Black Panther Party had deemed racial integration an unsuccessful venture and was advocating for distinct social spheres that separated the races. Thus, the 1970s rarely saw blackness featured prominently on the Broadway stage. The white-dominated press responded to the musical with such animosity that by opening night, closing notices were already posted. But an editorial by James P. Murray in the *New York Amsterdam News*—the oldest black newspaper in the United States—urged the black community to see the show. Murray accused white reviewers of attempting to kill the musical because they were unable to “respond to a white story satirized by Blacks and seen predominantly by Blacks on opening night.”³² Thus, *The Wiz* became a site for black theatregoers to celebrate the black community. The show evolved into an emblem of black pride, garnering seven Tony Awards (including Best Musical) and running for five years.³³

Separated from the racial politics of the 1970s, GLOW sought to use *The Wiz* and *Hot*

³⁰ Tamisea and Elser, interview.

³¹ *The Wiz* opened at the Majestic Theatre on January 5, 1975. Charlie Smalls wrote the music and lyrics, and William F. Brown wrote the libretto. It ran for 1,672 performances.

³² James P. Murray, “Blacks Invade Broadway in a Big Way . . . With Soul Cheers and Society Boos,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1975, D10, quoted in Wolf, *Changed for Good*, loc. 2218.

³³ A star-studded film adaptation in 1978 featured Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, and Nipsey Russell.

Mikado as a site for integration and diversity. But as we watched the events of the summer unfold and began rehearsal, we discovered that more and more of GLOW's usual patrons were refusing to support the season. GLOW approached some of their regular financial backers, and several told them that they were just not interested in these shows. The Greenville community boasts a strong Gilbert and Sullivan fanbase, but some of the more avid purists refused to patronize the season or see a production that was an adaptation of the operetta rather than maintaining the racially insensitive original. Many of the company's past supporters found a multitude of ways to say that they felt dispassionate about a season that centered on black lives. Amid the summer's racial turmoil, some white audience members preferred to avoid the subject. Although about half of GLOW's patrons trickled away, the other half showed up. Tamisea and Elser focused more intently on bringing celebratory representations to Greenville's black community and rising against the embedded racism that was burning throughout the state.

If neural frameworks of prejudice form in response to biased representations, *The Wiz* fights this with positive portrayals of blackness. To this end, Tamisea's concept for *The Wiz* worked to find magic in the everyday mundanities of a young, inner-city black teen. The characters represented people Dorothy might come across on a walk to school or on an average day. Therefore, searching for a way home becomes more than a ride back to reality. Tamisea's choice to position Oz as a version of Dorothy's reality reframes her journey as a successful navigation of a hostile community. The depiction of the loyal friendships that Dorothy forms emphasize the legitimacy of black-centered communities. While the text places Dorothy and her friendships outside of her daily reality, resituating them locates magic within the

community she already has.



Figure 3: Benjamin Moore (Tin Man), Mingo Xerron (Cowardly Lion), Tanisha Moore (Dorothy), and Christopher Lee (Scarecrow) in *The Wiz* at GLOW Lyric Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Stephen Boatwright, Permissions: GLOW)

The costume design of the three friends reflected Tamisea's concept (see Figure 3). The Tin Man's silver-gray coverall hinted at the uniform of a blue-collar worker. Dressed in rags, the Scarecrow became a homeless person. Reimagined as a drag diva, the Cowardly Lion challenged gender stereotypes and connected to the LGBTQ+ community. These reformulations of well-loved characters humanized people who often become disconnected from the community or fade into the background.



Figure 4: Leryn Terlington (Addaperle), Tierney Breedlove (Glinda), and Joslynn Cortes (Evillene) in *The Wiz* at GLOW Lyric Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Stephen Boatwright, Permissions: GLOW)

When Dorothy desperately asks for help to find her literal and spiritual home, she reaches out to a variety of people who can't assist her. Dorothy's guides, the three witches (see Figure 4), similarly reflected Tamisea's conception of Oz as an elevated representation of Dorothy's everyday life. Addaperle, the good witch of the north, was a humorously frazzled middle-school teacher with a Wisconsin accent. As a well-meaning (but essentially ineffective) white savior figure, GLOW's Addaperle did not have the tools to help Dorothy find her way home. The Wicked Witch of the West, Evillene, wore a dress made out of discarded trash, and her minions wore plastic refuse bags as they labored to build Evillene's garbage palace. As Tamisea describes, "each component of the set, props, and costumes held some recognizable element to Dorothy, but twisted in a way that explored her deepest fears and desires as a young black woman."³⁴ As a trash queen, Evillene threatened to not just detain Dorothy, but to

³⁴ Tamisea and Elser, interview.

pull her into the morass of the inner city's underbelly. Tamisea chose to cast Glinda as the same performer who played Aunt Em. Before the tornado sweeps Dorothy away at the beginning of the play, she lashes out at her exhausted, overworked guardian. Casting the same performer brought Dorothy's relationship with her family and community full circle. Breezing in at the end like a deus ex machina, GLOW's Good Witch of the East was a serene goddess-like figure with a multicolored, African-inspired skirt and flowers in her hair. In her duality, Glinda/Em emerged as a symbol of black womanhood, family, and cultural heritage to offer strength and help. GLOW's representation urged black women to trust in their inner power and the power of their black women role models.

Although GLOW's Oz remained primarily a fantastical place, Tamisea allowed Dorothy's inner-city reality to show through. Perhaps the most salient moment was the Cowardly Lion's arrest (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Tyler Pirrung (Mouse Police), Mingo Xerron (Cowardly Lion), and Anna Jane Trinci (Mouse Police) in *The Wiz*, GLOW Lyric Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Stephen Boatwright, Permissions: GLOW)

On the way to Oz, the friends find themselves in a field of poppies. Fans of *The Wizard of Oz*

might recall that the poppies cause Dorothy and her pals to fall asleep. In *The Wiz*, anthropomorphized poppies (a veiled reference to 1970s drug culture) attempt to seduce the four friends. When a group of police officers—written as mice with Napoleon complexes—arrive on the scene, they arrest the Cowardly Lion for indecent conduct. With so many recent police shootings fresh in our memory, Tamisea decided to allow the actor to take control of the moment rather than imposing her white perspective. She encouraged him to improvise his lines as the mice manhandled him into custody. The actor elicited audible gasps from audiences when he decided to cry out “I can’t breathe!” His choice referenced Eric Garner, who repeated the phrase as he died on July 17, 2014, at the hands of New York City police officers. Video evidence shows Garner pleading through an illegal choke hold and losing consciousness after officers arrested him for selling loose cigarettes. By placing a lovable and essentially innocuous character under the sudden threat of police violence, the scene countered the apologist narrative that centers on representing black male victims as criminals. In a community fraught with raw nerves and racial friction, the choice to echo Eric Garner encouraged audiences to empathize rather than denigrate.

We sought to bring these representations to a diverse audience by reaching out to the community. GLOW partnered with three different local organizations: The Dream Center, which offers free services, classes, and after-school programs to children and families struggling with homelessness; Generations, a group home for neglected or at-risk adolescent and pre-adolescent males to help them to overcome learned abusive behaviors; and The Urban League of Greenville, which works to provide economic empowerment, educational opportunities, and the guarantee of civil rights to underserved citizens. All three of these organizations work

primarily with people of color in Greenville and the surrounding area. With our goal of reaching out to these communities, we offered each of these organizations eight hundred free tickets to distribute to their members. The predominantly white audience from previous seasons became a diverse crowd composed of both the loyal contingent of regular patrons and new faces from normally underserved communities who had never been welcomed into Greenville's theatres. The mixed crowd became a multiracial community as they laughed and applauded.

In order to bring positive representations to the most vulnerable members of the community, GLOW invited about a hundred at-risk children from the Generations group home to attend the final dress rehearsals for both *The Wiz* and *Hot Mikado*. Before the run, Tamisea asked the kids in the audience how many were attending the theatre for the first time. Nearly every hand shot up. We watched as these kids became absorbed with the stories onstage, laughing and applauding wildly for both shows. At one point, when our Cowardly Lion dropped into a spectacular split during "Ease on Down the Road," they cheered so enthusiastically that it took a moment to restart the performance. Afterwards, they flooded into the lobby where they met the cast with awe and elation. One young Latina girl approached the Latina actor who played Evillene (the Wicked Witch of the West), and suspiciously asked if she was really Hispanic. When the performer confirmed that she was, the girl broke into a grin and told her that she wanted to be just like her. The kids were thrilled to see so many people onstage who looked like them. As part of the Generations program, the children had all faced some kind of abuse or serious hardship. Representing people of color as strong, positive members of a community helped to work against the messages of inferiority put forth by the systematic vilification or exclusion that dominates representation in popular, white-centered

entertainment.

One production can't, in and of itself, solve centuries of deeply rooted institutionalized racism. But in the midst of a summer charged with anger and anti-black hate, a multiracial audience came together to celebrate black stories. Jill Dolan cites:

Communitas, a term popularized in performance studies scholarship by anthropologist Victor Turner, [which] describes the moments in a theater event or ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators' individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience.³⁵

Dolan describes "performance's effect on the audience as a temporary community, perhaps inspired by communitas feel themselves citizens of a no-place that's a better place, citizens who might then take that feeling into other sites of public discourse."³⁶ A community infiltrated by systemic prejudice provides an unconscious support system for violent crimes through the dehumanization of those who become categorized as outsiders. However, flooding the neural bias framework of audiences with positive representations can, in time, change perspectives. Drawing audience members together from different belonging communities forms a new diverse community that challenges the efficacy of homogenous ones. GLOW's summer season formulated temporary multiracial societies that together enjoyed the positive representation of people of color. For two and a half hours, they rehearsed as an inclusive community. Rehearsing as inclusive communities can begin to manifest in more permanent social structures.

Choreographer Maurice Sims posted again on Facebook on July 19 as the show closed:

³⁵ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), 11.

³⁶ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 15.

“WE MADE ART WHEN THE WORLD NEEDED IT . . . WE WON.” GLOW’s mission shows the potential power of musical theatre to reach across different class and cultural lines as a popular form. Inviting diverse voices, stories, and representations into the room can literally change the way audience members think. Live theatre has the unique ability to form communities and speak to denizens on a local level as artists share space with audiences. Despite a long history of racism in the United States, shifting representations in popular culture and bringing those representations to a democratized public has the potential to effect changes in social attitudes on the neurological level, and it offers a first step toward fighting institutionalized racism.

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