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Get In Where You Fit In: Creating a Safe Space for Students of Color in the Academy, John Shévin Foster, Kashi Johnson, and Daphnie Sicre in Conversation

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Get In Where You Fit In: Creating a Safe Space for Students of Color in the Academy,

John Shévin Foster, Kashi Johnson, and Daphnie Sicre in Conversation

April 10, 2015

In reference to Offering 10 – “#Unyielding Truth: employing culturally relevant pedagogy” by Kashi Johnson and Daphnie Sicre in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

Abstract

Well-known playwright and theatre leader John Shévin Foster interviewed Kashi Johnson and Daphnie Sicre about the ways in which they use Hip Hop theatre pedagogy in their courses. Mapping their time together at Lehigh University as undergraduates up to becoming theatre professors themselves, Johnson and Sicre share how students might feel empowered by the opportunities given to them in their courses.

Introduction



DAPHNIE SICRE



JOHN SHEVIN FOSTER



KASHI JOHNSON

The moment we were asked to invite someone into conversation about our work innovating the traditional acting class with Hip Hop Theatre and Theater of the Oppressed performance techniques, we both immediately thought of Dr. John Shévin Foster. John is not only an accomplished playwright, director and passionate theatre artist, he is also an experienced theatre educator who is uniquely familiar with the power and impact of Hip Hop Theatre and theatre for

social change, having served in, and headed theatre programs at three leading universities, including New York University; and he served as the Education Manager and producer of international theatre at BA/Brooklyn Academy of Music for nine years. We both met John through our membership in the Black Theatre Network, where he currently serves on the executive board. Through our individual workshop presentations at the national conference over the years, John came to learn about our shared passion for creating safe academic spaces that encourage empowered self-expression and dramatic critique of social justice issues. We felt John's accumulated personal and professional experience with Hip Hop Education, Poetry and Educational Theatre made him the perfect person to interview us for this project. Well aware of his legacy and impact as a theatre artist and educator, we were confident he would interview us with genuine interest, possessing the expertise to challenge or critique our work deeply, if needed. As one of the executive leaders of the Black Theatre Network, John holds Black theatre in high regard. When it comes to his work as a playwright and director, he focuses on creating accurate portrayals of contemporary African American life and creates works for artists of color that allow them to stretch beyond the typical roles and subjects they/we are normally afforded. His commitment to and advocacy for Black theatre inspired the three of us to engage in a dynamic conversation about social justice activism in the theatre classroom and rehearsal space.

John: Let's talk about your process in relation to the environments of your learning institutions and the unique atmosphere you both manage to create in your classrooms. What inspired this new academic approach? What made you start thinking about this type of classroom environment and what came out of that?

Kashi: Hip Hop is my first love and theatre is my passion. As an acting teacher I am always interested in discovering new ways to enhance my students' ability to perform with confidence and authenticity. In the early 2000s I learned about the emerging genre Hip Hop theatre, and began to see the work of Hip Hop theater artists like Danny Hoch, Universes, Jonzi D, Will Power and others. I was transformed. It was empowering to experience the grace, power and

beauty of Hip Hop expressed on stage for and about the Hip Hop generation. They were telling my story on stage and I wanted to be down. I realized that the best place for me to start would be my classroom and I just needed to explore. So I created an experimental Hip Hop theatre course that I named “Act Like You Know.” After my second year of teaching the course, I realized it was evolving into more than a performance course; it was quickly becoming a destination for marginalized students, particularly Black students, in search of refuge. Even students who weren’t enrolled in the course would come and visit, so they could experience a space on campus that felt familiar and safe. Lehigh is a small, predominantly white, highly competitive, private institution, ranked 47th in US News and World Report college rankings and it’s no surprise that my course stood out, as one student put it, “an oasis in the desert.” As a Lehigh alum and a member of the faculty for fifteen years, I have witnessed many uncomfortable campus climate situations. Racial incidents that have garnered national attention - most recently the multicultural residence, the Umoja House, was spray painted with the “n” word.

John: How did that environment at Lehigh affect you and your students? What did they bring to your classroom when the door closed and everyone’s like, I got to say this?

Daphnie: When I went there, there were no places. We had the BSU (Black Student Union), but there were no actual physical spaces.

Kashi: There were very few spaces for students to articulate their feelings and share their experiences beyond the town hall conversations led by the Dean of Students office. There really wasn’t a space on campus for students to authentically express themselves, however they wanted, until this course.

John: So they were coming to you for theatre and they knew that this was a space that they could talk about their issues, their experiences, their ideas.

Kashi: Right, exactly. 2017 will mark the 10th generation of the class, which means, since its inception, it's been taught eight times. Each generation continues the legacy, with the understanding that they will go through the gauntlet of Hip Hop and performance, coming out on the other side, performing a show, where they are able to speak their truth and tell it to the world. I don't let them just pussyfoot around; I kind of model the class with the intention that we hit the ground on the first day just being willing to share and not being afraid. And if they can learn how to trust the process, they believe that I'm going to lead them somewhere better than where they started. So far, it's worked out. And the beautiful gift is the course attracts a diverse group of students who now seek out the class based on its reputation and legacy.

Daphnie: Kashi, I think word of mouth is huge. Because with my course at Marymount, which is the Arts and Social Justice, we do Hip Hop, we do spoken word, we do murals, we do all these different things. This semester, as I entered my class, I had fifteen dance majors in the class. I'm looking and I'm like the dance majors have taken over; how come I have so many dance majors? And they said, "Sicre, we all talk about our classes. We discuss and this is a class where we can talk about issues that we are not allowed to talk about in any other class. This is a class where we can create." It really is the word of mouth, it absolutely is

John: This idea of what needs to be created, this space for these students. As teachers and friends you've been creating this in your respective institutions now, correct? So can we talk about what exactly is created because you just started to talk about that process.

Daphnie: Yes, I have two classes where we're looking at justice and I use Hip Hop pedagogy. One at Marymount College, which is predominantly White, and similar to Lehigh but the big difference is that Lehigh is in a relatively small town in Pennsylvania and, Marymount is in New York City. My students at Marymount can walk out the door and experience diversity. They don't have it at their institution but they can have it once they walk outside the door. But my class, just like Kashi's class, attracts students of color. Almost every semester I have a ton of students of color. My class is not really a depiction of what the college is like and I think the same goes for Kashi's class. But they find our classes because they've heard they can have honest dialogue and a safe space to create. For example at Marymount there is a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) and there is a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree program. If you're in the BFA program whether it's dance or theatre, you get to create something for yourself, but if you're in the BA program you don't. A lot of times I get a lot of BA students, because they know they get to finally create something in my class and they can apply the practices of Hip Hop pedagogy or Theater of the Oppressed to create original work. In my class my students can create a final piece that is five minutes long. It can be whatever they want, as long as it is rooted in a social justice issue or cause.

John: So give me an example of what a five-minute piece might look like.

Daphnie: A Hip Hop or spoken word piece or a dance piece, it depends. Sometimes they perform original music, sometimes they use other music, sometimes their pieces are multidimensional. I had one student who wanted to address the stereotypes of being a White Latino. He wrote a spoken word piece and performed his poem as we walked into the room. He had images on the screen flashing every three to five seconds, different images of what it means to be Latino. Simultaneously, he posted images of what others may perceive as White Latinos on the wall. But then you lift the image; below you could see what they actually are and everything that they are mixed with, that they are just not White. They can also be Black but they just happen to look the way that they do, and so society labels them automatically. So he's looking into not just White Latinos but also he wants to look at anyone who's mixed and who gets targeted as being White or passing. That's one experience – walking in the room and experiencing this interactive display, while he's performing his spoken word piece. I had another student a couple of years ago who's actually an incredible dancer. He's a Hip Hop dancer, runs his own Hip Hop dance classes in the city and gets hired to dance. His five-minute piece was this beautiful performance about being a Black man, being gay and what it meant to walk around as a “man” where everyone always assumes he is straight because of his “manhood.” His piece was just beautiful. He put every one of his movements to these beats, as he used the Hip Hop music that he teaches and he dances to, to express his sexuality. At the end he had all these pieces of paper on the wall that were covered, as he danced, he ripped off the covers. They said, “I am Black,” “I am African American,” “I am my mother's child.” The second to last piece that he ripped down said, “I'm gay” – and the final piece read, “I am me.” They get to create their own projects where they can apply who they are and what they inherently know, to what they've learned in class, and express themselves through performance.

John:

How do you do that?

Daphnie: For me it's just a combination of pedagogies; we will do an activity in order to talk about social injustice. For example, I do a workshop around writing spoken word, where we will do a physical theatre workshop that looks at oppression. And so we will use some of Boal's techniques and games that physicalize oppression. Then we sit down and talk about what it was like to physicalize oppression in the classroom with these activities, and then we draw parallels to life. Then I'll announce, "Okay. Now we have this, now we can start writing." And so I use the physicality and the games that Boal teaches with the oppressed, to spark classroom conversations, whether it's conversation in music, whether it's dance, whether it's writing, whichever art form, and then whatever art form they want to take. In almost every class we do different Boal-esque exercises but they are all adaptations of his work.

We've done topic discussions on graffiti, street art and murals and the importance of that; and before that we did photography. There is a wonderful activity that Boal does that looks at perspective - point of view. You have the students stand in a circle, while you create a picture with a bottle and chairs inside the circle and you ask "Who's got the power in this picture?" And you move the water bottle around. So you can spend forty-five minutes talking about who has the power, can the water bottle have the power? And it's all about angles and perspectives of how they're looking at the picture and from what angle. Then we related that to the photography lesson and when we examined graffiti, murals and street art. You know, what is the perspective? What is the message? Who's got the power in this image that you're seeing?

John:

That's wonderful, I'm just relating to it all. End result, a beautiful show, the photos are revealed, beautiful show. In process, what does the student/actor

get from this?

Daphnie: I can't speak for them per se, but I can share what they've told me. For many of them it's cathartic, even for my students who are White. They will share their gratitude for finally having an academic space where they can explore these issues and ideas, and have these meaningful dialogues. Sometimes it's more internal and they will say that they are grateful that they finally got to create a piece where they can speak and have a voice. In my class, students of color are not being told that you have to play 'sister number one' instead, they are the main character in the piece that they've written for themselves. And yes, it may only be a five-minute piece but then it's theirs, and they own it. I try to record some pieces, to keep for them. I have one student who created a piece that looked at domestic violence and abuse. She wrote a monologue about it. By the end, she was so empowered by her work - in the story, she had gone through domestic abuse and her mother had been abused - that she posted it on YouTube and used that monologue to fight against domestic violence by starting a conversation about abuse. That blew my mind, because my students don't just leave it in the classroom, they take it out into the world. And that to me is like... Wow! They didn't just do this for a grade in the class, they did this for themselves. I think the gift is empowering students to find their voice and having a space where that voice can be heard, instead of simply being relegated to the background. All of a sudden, they have a voice, their voice, and they have the tools to create a performance piece where they have the power. And I'm not the person who is coming in, editing it and saying "no, no." I'm guiding them through the process and asking "Is this going to be stronger? Is this helping you with the message? Are you going to get your point across with this? How do we get there without having this and this?" I'm not the type of professor who says, "This is a terrible idea." Instead I like to encourage my students by asking "How are you going to get this idea

across? How are you going to make this idea happen?” Also, when they have twenty ideas and they come to me like “I want to do this, this, and this.” I’ll push back with the question, “You only have five minutes, how are you going to put all of that into five minutes?” This is where my Freire pedagogy comes in; giving them the power to choose. I am not the one telling them what to put in and what not. I’m also not interrupting their creative process by saying “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” On the contrary, they *do* know what they are talking about. So instead, I offer “Let’s do this together, let me guide you. I’m not editing, you’re the one editing. This is your project, if you don’t do it or if you do a shitty project that’s on you. That’s not on me. What matters is that you’ve created something that matters to you.” And usually out of twenty-five students, twenty-four own it and create beautiful projects that live beyond the life of the class. And so the conversation keeps going, it doesn’t just stop. For some, I think my class gives them the power to believe that they can do other things. I had a student who was tired of never being cast, in four years she was never cast in a single show at Marymount College; an incredible Latina. She wrote a piece that looked at sexuality. An unbelievable piece that she directed, wrote and staged for us. She cast five actors and she wasn’t even in it. We ended up filming it because it was really powerful and we wanted to have a record of it. After she did this she said, “Wow, I can do this.” I said, “Yes, you can.” I was like “Now get out there. You’re done with this school. Get out there and follow what you want to do. Just because you were told no for four years doesn’t mean that you can’t do this.” And she’s been getting cast left and right and doing projects and doing things for herself ever since. It’s beautiful to see she was like “F” the system!

John: That’s wonderful a wonderful example. Kashi, I know you’re hearing some similarities in the story. And you’re there with facilities, resources...

Kashi: Yes, resources to produce and the academic freedom to explore and create Hip Hop centered pedagogy. I love to help young people find their voice, speak their truth and so I continually devise ways I can use Hip Hop to empower them to do just that. In my classroom, Hip Hop is the Trojan horse that lures students in. Some come to the class simply thinking “I like the Hip Hop dance. I’ll take this class to do that.” And I’m like, that’s fine you’ll be doing that and so much more. Since the first time I taught this course over ten years ago, I have perfected several performance projects that allow me to slowly gain my students’ trust while simultaneously building their performance muscle. The first step is students have to audition and interview to be in the course. During registration for classes, the course catalogue reads students must have instructor permission to be allowed into the course. The audition and interview stops like 75% of potential students from bum-rushing the course. The 25% that actually have the heart to audition and sit and talk with me, I almost always give permission to enroll. That is the secret, they have to have heart.

John: Yeah but it is part of the process for them, right?

Kashi: Yes. Once we have time to talk in the interview, and I explain exactly what they’re getting into, it’s fine. On the first day of class, students actually perform their audition pieces for the class. It’s the mother of all icebreakers and it clearly demonstrates, this is a performance course; we’re all unpolished and uncomfortable and we’re all going to be in this thing together. The performance projects they create and rehearse throughout the semester, eventually culminate into a Department of Theatre supported, public performance, at the end of the semester. Over the years, the department has witnessed the growing impact of my course and responded in kind, by providing many of those resources you mentioned. The class’ final show is

presented on the department's main stage and given minimal production support in the way of limited lighting and sound design, scenic support and house management. Since 2009, this final class show has consistently welcomed over 250 audience members, including students' family, friends, Lehigh University and the surrounding community. It was important for me to create projects with accessible entry points, where students who didn't know Hip Hop could be as successful as the students who live and breathe the culture. The class anthem is another example of this. The anthem is assigned at the start of the semester. Everyone gets the same song, and they are asked to learn the lyrics cold. Throughout the semester I request delivery of the song, in a pop-quiz style. By the end of the semester, I am able to create a company number for the final show. You can't do a number when everybody doesn't know all the lyrics. But if everybody knows, anybody can jump in. So I keep them on their toes with several projects like that. When we do spoken word, I introduce it in terms of it being performance poetry. We watch clips of various performances and discuss the impact, message and urgency of what the poet is attempting to convey. I ask "What is this poet's raw truth?" "What moves you about their performance?" "How brave did they have to be to write this piece?" "Is vulnerability an asset in spoken word performance?" Then I give them the mandate to go off and start writing. It's a challenging process for some students, while others take to it like a fish in water. No matter the circumstance, my job is to get them from the page to stage. I empower them to believe what they have to say matters, and I help them excavate their piece for authenticity and truth. Last year, during this process, one of my students wrote a "yes I can" poem. With each draft, she remained on the surface of her message and connection to her material. The third time we met, there was one line that hinted at something that wasn't "yes I can" and she declared "I want to get rid of that," which intrigued me. So I asked about it, and after a moment, with standing tears in her eyes, she revealed she was a victim of bullying growing up. Needless to say, she scrapped her old poem and started

to write about that instead. It was a very difficult process for her. So much so, a week before the final show she came to me and told me she didn't want to perform the piece. In that moment, I grabbed her hands, looked her in the eyes and told her this is what the class is all about. I said, "Be brave. I promise one day you're going to remember this, you may not remember me, but you will remember this because together, this project and this class are going to help move you past this point. You have a family of twenty-two people, including me, standing behind you, supporting you fully, cheering you on, so that you can move past this. What kind of teacher would I be if I let you retreat from the very thing you are strong enough to face?"

Daphnie: As the semester progresses.

John: And this young lady is going to be doing this piece in the show next week? The young lady with the bullying piece.

Kashi: Oh yes. As I said, she tried to back out of it, but decided to commit instead. I think she's slowly starting to see what I strive to teach: through sharing our truths, we're able to access the universal through the personal. This may be her story, but it's not *only* her story. So, I try to empower my students by asking them to think about the audience and the gift that can give them, by being courageous enough to share their story. Theatre.

John: Yes.

Daphnie: I think that's where Kashi and I have such similar parallels because this is what we do: try to get them to tell their stories. But it's not just their stories, it's in their stories, it's the story of other people, the commonalities of so many. As Kashi was explaining, I'm thinking of my classes as the semester

progresses, and how open and trusting they become, how they share more, and how their conversations evolve, becoming so much deeper with the passing of time. And so does their writing. But you reach that level now and it's so wonderful.

John: Kashi, just a few minutes ago you were talking about the person saying "I'm in this class because I want to dance," and a few minutes later she's like why am I baring my soul?

Kashi: Exactly, Hip Hop will do that to you.

John: Say it again, Hip Hop will do that. The thing that interests me is social media and Hip Hop. Social media plays such a role in these kids' lives and they're really guiding us through it now because that's theirs. We tag on to Facebook but it's theirs

Kashi: You are so right. It's all theirs. Here's a funny story. Over the years, I've prided myself on being this social media savvy, progressive professor, so I set-up a secret Facebook group for my Hip Hop theatre class. I've been doing it for a couple of years now, with good results. This year I noticed even though participation on the Facebook group was down, it was clear from the class energy and camaraderie, they were still clearly connecting and sharing. When I confronted the class, I was informed that everyone was communicating through the app Group Me, which is, as they explained far more convenient for socializing. They still referenced our Facebook group to keep up with

assignments and my posts, but their preferred connectivity happened outside my gaze, and I couldn't be mad at that. Whatever it takes to build ensemble.

Daphnie: It's so hard to keep up. Both Kashi and I have been incorporating digital media into both of our classes, and what's really interesting is that I keep discovering new things. I don't do Vine or Snapchat, I discovered those for the first time in my class because the students would talk about it, asking "Sicre, aren't you on Snapchat?" And I'm like "Snapchat? What is that?" A couple years ago it was Vine. And all these social media tools are what's in style at the moment. And this progression of, you know, they grew up with Myspace and then Myspace disappeared. They went into Facebook and then all these other social media platforms appeared. Right now they're huge fanatics of Snapchat. Facebook took a dive for a long time with the younger generation, but they've sort of gone back to it again. Now, they're using it for social groups, gathering and creating pages, more so than for posting, which fascinates me. I'm trying to learn and I'm trying to keep up with all these things, because I'm constantly trying to figure out "how do I incorporate these things for them?"

John: Kashi, back to your Hip Hop class, so you teach them the foundation and the history of Hip Hop and they learn that but, at what point do they start talking about their issues, discussing what's relevant to them today? Are they bringing in what is now and what is today to you and then what do you do with that?

Kashi: Yes. I think that's one of the reasons why the class is a success. First of all, they trust and respect my knowledge of Hip Hop enough to bring in Hip Hop related issues and projects they are doing outside of class, to me. It's not uncommon to hear "I sent you a link to my music SoundCloud Kashi," or

“Here’s a video I shot over the summer on my YouTube channel. Check it out.” They trust me, and are willing to share more of themselves once they recognize that I can help them elevate their performance ability. For instance, I currently have a student who’s an MC and can rap faster than almost anybody I’ve ever heard. I feel my job, and what I want to teach him to do, is ground himself in the desire to *want* to communicate his words, not just spit them out, which he is slowly learning to do – and that’s performance. So it kind of balances out when they apply the training I offer to their current repertoire of performing Hip Hop.

Daphnie: Kashi, I’m having the same exact thought. I have a student that’s a rapper and he will send me his videos and ask me to critique the acting in the video. First I hold their hand and ask “Are you sure you want me to do this?” And they’re like “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah because this is like really important for me.” I ask again, “You’re sure?” And then start, “Alright let’s step into it.” ...and I have to tell them, they’re trying too hard. I have to rip them. I don’t mean to rip them, but I have to because they asked me to make it better. I explain. “You need to be yourself in this, that’s the truth; it’s you being you, not you being a persona, pretending to be a persona while you’re rapping these incredible lyrics that you’ve written. Who we, the audience is going to gravitate towards is not the persona, it’s you.”

Kashi: I just want to add, that’s the thing that always been my guiding force as a teacher and director: always keep the audience in mind. The audience knows and can call out authenticity over bullshit any day, so that’s important. I’m a glorified BS meter and if I don’t buy it, then some aspect of that performance is lacking.

John: At this point where the kids are really bringing in the culture, their culture of today, culture we don't know about every day because they are, not necessarily hiding it from us but, it's between them, does this theatrical work then become a partnership, or is it still something that you're automatically helping them build anyway?

Kashi: I think it's a little bit of both. For me, it moderates according to the people. There are some students, who need to lean heavily on my coaching and direction, and there are others who desire my affirmation, and encouragement to keep the proverbial wind beneath their wings - it depends on the individual

Daphnie: I think it's different for me. Instead of a partnership, I see myself more as a dramaturge in the sense of being behind the scenes. I wouldn't necessarily get the credit of the partnership but I know that I've helped shaped it in some way. That's how I see it for me.

John: That makes it. I love it, I do understand it. I think, even if it wasn't the word partnership, I think more so in that visually what is really great from what I've heard from you both, is that you've elevated your students to the point that they are returning in the creation process, with the tools that they have now. Does that make sense?

Daphnie:

Yes!

Kashi: I have a great quick story. You know one of the things I always say in my class is Hip Hop is about taking what is and remaking it into something new. So if they come across something that they like, a song, a poem, a video, I'm always challenging them to find a way to reinterpret it in their own voice. I currently have a young man in my class, re-taking the course on an advanced level. He's been with me since his freshman year, so he clearly knows my process. This time around, I assigned him the piece 'Hip Hop is Not Rap' by Danny Hoch. As he rehearsed it, he instinctually embodied the piece with energy and passion that channeled the message just like a preacher; so much so, he had his classmates spontaneously erupting in call and response similar to that of a congregation on fire with the word. In that moment, he was filled with the spirit that Danny Hoch wrote. He believed in the words, made physical choices that supported his message and modulated the use of his voice to convey the message. I didn't make him do that. I believe after four years of working with me; he finally got it. Not only did he understand the context of the material, he trusted his choices and in that moment, gave himself permission to follow his impulses - that's what made him do that. And I just get chills thinking about it now because I remember the soft-spoken young man he was when he first walked in my classroom years ago.

John: Is the ultimate moment for you seeing them come into their own and finally being able to express themselves? Is that what it is, is there more, or is it something else?

Kashi: That's all it is for me, it's a drug. I have given several talks this year about my class, and it's so funny, when I talk about that pinnacle moment when my students find their voice and fully stand in the courage to express themselves, I get emotionally choked up. That's what it's all about for me.

Daphnie:

Yes. Ditto. And sometimes no one else will ever know because we don't always record these performances, but even if we did, someone else may see the final product, but they haven't witnessed the trajectory. So they haven't seen the changes or what it took that person to get there – we have.

John:

What is the one thing you wish you could teach, that you can't touch?

Daphnie:

For me, I'm not tenured and I don't have the resources or facilities, for example, where I'm teaching. Even at BMCC (Borough of Manhattan Community College) I teach Advanced Public Speaking for Social Justice and we do spoken word pieces. When I started teaching it, I wanted to infuse even more Hip Hop pedagogy in that class even though it's a public speaking course. I want to infuse different pedagogies into it to engage my students but I am not sure if I can. I also really wish I had a space to create some of these things, you know the proper room. I really wish I had the technology and then I really wish I could talk about certain subjects without feeling censored because I don't have tenure. Then at Marymount I wish for different things. For example, they are really into transgender rights and using the correct terminology. But then we jumped into a discussion like what is the correct terminology? Is it "'Z', 'they', 'he' 'she'", you know, like what is it? And even having those conversations with my students I'm not trained and so I want to be trained in something like that. Because to me it's so current, it's not current for them, it's totally normal for them; for me it's totally new. They have one workshop a semester but never during the times I am not teaching at BMCC. Thus, I have to say I'm not trained in this, I don't have the expertise. Many of our conversations do go into the realm where a student will say, "Can we please use preferred pronouns." Then you know, it's coming from a student

and I wish we could jump into that conversation and I know that I'm not trained in it and it's so hard not to have it. I'm going to a couple trainings this year that hopefully will help me but even talking with my friends who are gay or lesbian, this is happening so fast, so quickly, it's like where am I getting the resources to be able to learn about this to touch these subjects? So if I want to touch these subjects and talk about these subjects because my students want to talk about them, how do I get the training so that I can? Finding that balance is key. For example, a lot of my young women really want to talk about abuse on campus and being sexually accosted and I always question, how much can we talk about this? I'm not a therapist. How much can we reveal in the space? What if they create a piece that is looking at this? What is my responsibility? Am I supposed to report this? Did it happen on campus? Did it not happen on campus? And so all of those questions. When we're dealing with these topics I always question and wonder can I touch them? And then of course for me is that fear that I don't have tenure yet so I can't and I want to.

Kashi: Having the protection of tenure definitely takes my class into a different realm in that regard. I never know what a class is going to reveal – this year I had several students come forward, through their work to reveal how they cope with their mental health issues. Talk about opening Pandora's Box. When I am out of my depths, I admit it to the student and seek more guidance or advice from those more knowledgeable, but I start with the student always. I feel like if they felt safe enough to share, then it's my responsibility to protect that, and nurture it.

Daphnie: I have a question Kashi. At Lehigh are they big on triggers? Because that's the big thing right now.

Kashi: I've heard of it, but there hasn't been an institutional mandate to enforce trigger warnings or anything like that. It hasn't come to my doorstep yet but I'm starting to think about it differently.

Daphnie: I hadn't experienced it until a couple of years ago when a student came up to me and said "Professor Sicre you need to give trigger warnings." So, I realized I need to. And so I have to preface – if I'm going to show a photograph of a lynching, I have to preface. If I'm going to show someone creating simulated rape, I have to preface this. If I'm showing someone attempting suicide, I have to preface this. And it's been such an interesting experience for me this year to start incorporating this notion of triggers. And to think about that, five years ago I just said whatever I wanted to say. But now I have to be careful if I'm going to show something visually such as a video, that I have to give them the power of egress, that it's okay not to participate, or give them a trigger warning. If something is making them feel uncomfortable, they can leave the room. And even as a professor, I'm still struggling with this notion. Especially when looking at social justice - how do you expose people? How do you start talking about these deep issues whether it's mental illness, whether it's sexual abuse, whether it's bullying, whether it's racism, whether it's oppression, whether it's social inequality, how do I start talking about these issues if we have to constantly provide triggers? And what if we provide a trigger and the student leaves the room and that student is the one that needs to be talking about this? And talking about it could help them create a piece that could engage in some sort of maybe healing. I don't know. Those are the things I think that I would love to be able to touch and not fear or not worry about.

John: Last question here and I think it's really bringing us all the way back to the work to the theatre. And the question is: How do we see this work contributing to the legacy of theater?

Kashi: I think my class, my work, empowers the millennial generation to see themselves within the context of Hip Hop culture. That is to say, while they may not have created Hip Hop, they can fully participate and continue to innovate within the culture. I'm excited when we build bridges of understanding and students truly recognize the power of Hip Hop. It goes from being just rap music and dance, to empowerment, self-expression and truth. I'm excited by the impending gifts the next generation will bring. Hopefully, people that I have taught and sparked that interest in, will do things with the art form... things that I can't begin to imagine.

Daphnie: I think about Augusto Boal and re-mixing his work in a hip hop framework, and I have some friends who say, "Oh his teachings are outdated blah, blah, blah," but I got to meet him, and I got to train with him, and I got to learn from him. To be able to keep sharing what he taught me is priceless. And then to adapt his work into my own, is even more priceless. When I went to college, I didn't know who Augusto Boal was. Even when I got my Master's degree, I didn't know who he was. When I got my second Master's in Educational Theatre, I was slightly exposed to who he was and the work. I thought, "Theatre of the Oppressed? This was exactly what I want to be doing." So that's partly to be able to spread a little bit of his legacy and continue to keep that alive, I think is so important. And in that, to expose students to a different type of theatre, where they do have their voices; where they don't have to wait, like Kashi said, to be in *for colored girls*. They don't have to wait four years, if they go to a predominantly white institution, if their

school only does one Black show a year, and that's the only show that they're in. I want them to know that they do have the power to create their own work, and that their work can make a difference, that they can do theater for social change. That they can create theatre that is going to send a message to other people. Theatre does that already, no matter what you're presenting but then it can create change. I feel like Kashi and I are planting little seeds and these seeds are not seeds for flowers, they're seeds for trees. Maybe the wind will carry the seeds somewhere else and in little drops, or a bird will carry a seed and it will drop somewhere and these trees will grow. And so, if this work can get out there, if students know that it's available to them, and accessible and an option; it's another way into the theatre. It's another way to create and express what they have to say. And that it doesn't have to be this Western look at theatre; that it can be very diverse. It can have multiple colors; multiple layers and it can create change. If I can help spread those little seeds, I am so happy and that's just great.

John: That is beautiful from both of you

Kashi: It is beautiful.

John: And I think that is a good spot for us to end. Thank you.

Dr. John Shévin Foster is a playwright, director and producer. He recently served as the Education Manager at BAM/Brooklyn Academy of Music for nine years. He is the Founding Artistic Director of NYC Rep/New York City Repertory Theatre. An August Wilson scholar, he holds a BA in Dramatic Studies and a BS in Education from Shaw University, an MA (Educational Theatre) and PhD in theatre from New York University, with additional study and certification from the University of Leeds, London. Professionally, he has served as Artistic Director of the Department of Dramatic Studies at Shaw University, for eight years as the

Director of Theatre at Virginia State University and as the visiting professor of theatre at NYU. He also serves as the VP for the Black Theatre Network, and next year's President. His work centers on accurate and honest portrayals of African American life. His latest play, *Plenty of Time*, will debut at the Ensemble Theatre in Houston, TX later in 2016.

Kashi Johnson is a Professor of Theatre at Lehigh University where she teaches courses in performance, Hip Hop theatre and directs plays. An innovator in Hip Hop theatre pedagogy for over 10 years, Professor Johnson has devised several plays with her students, including *generation Txt*, *Speaking Freely* and *Untold Truths*. Dedicated to cultivating voices from the Hip Hop generation, she co-founded Redsun Productions as a performance platform for local artists and aspiring performers. She has given video recorded talks about 'Act Like You Know,' her cutting-edge Hip Hop theater course, for TEDx and BlackademicsTV, and published on the topic in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*. At Lehigh University, she is the proud recipient of numerous teaching and service awards including the Stabler Award for Excellence in Teaching and the Class of '61 Professorship. She holds an M.F.A. in Acting from the University of Pittsburgh and is a member of Actor's Equity Association and the Black Theatre Network.

Dr. Daphnie Sicre is Assistant Professor in the Speech, Communications and Theatre Arts Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY, where she teaches courses in theatre, social justice, and advanced public speaking. She also teaches Latinx Theatre and Arts and Social Justice at Marymount Manhattan College. Focusing on Afro-Latinx performance, she completed her Ph.D. at New York University in Educational Theatre in 2017. Before that, she received her M.A. in Educational Theatre also from NYU, an M.A. in The Teaching of Social Studies from Columbia University, and holds a B.A. in Journalism, History & Theatre from Lehigh University. Select New York City directing credits include: *Shower Me* at the FringeNYC and *Stranger for Stage Black*, where she won the Best Director award. Raised in Madrid, Spain, but born in Guayaquil, Ecuador to Peruvian and Spanish parents, she shares a deep passion for discovering multiple Latinx and African-American perspectives in theatre.