

“There Is No Such Thing as Colour-Blindness”: Artistic Directors on Culturally Specific Casting

by Santiago Guzmán, Rahul Varma, Pam Patel, Ari Weinberg, Colin Wolf, and Mercedes Bátiz-Benét

Editors’ Note: The editorial team invited artistic directors from culturally specific theatre companies from across the country to offer their perspective on what culturally specific casting means to them. Their responses address a variety of topics, from culturally specific and colour-blind casting to audition rooms and community conversations.

Culturally specific casting: A double-edged sword

Santiago Guzmán

I believe I was trained to be a white actor. I attended a BFA program in Newfoundland and Labrador where at the time I was the only performer of colour, and all my instructors were white. I did learn about acting, of course, but I was constantly asked to fit within the limits of the white characters I was usually cast in. Rare were the times when I could be *all* of me.

That was my reality with casting as a performer with a ‘different’ skin colour and accent working professionally in the Newfoundland and Labrador theatre scene. From the plays programmed to the lack of willingness of white directors to be challenged in their casting choices, the pool of opportunities was very limited for me (not to mention the micro- and macro-aggressions in the workplace).

Shortly before I graduated from theatre school, I embraced playwriting as an act of rebellion. After being constantly typecast in hurtful stereotypes or meaningless background roles, I decided to tell stories that were close to my heart and experience so that *all of me* could be onstage.

My work as a writer tends to be very specific, in the way that my characters’ intersecting identities are very well defined: Mexican, queer, brown characters living in Newfoundland and Labrador. This effort reflects my intention of having identities like



Santiago Guzmán plays Eugenio in the one-person show he authored, *ALTAR*. Eugenio (wearing a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and brown shoes) stands next to a colourful altar he set up for his ex-boyfriend: there’s a frame with his ex-boyfriend’s photo in the top tier; the second level is covered with a red tablecloth and has two white candles and a blue coffee mug; and the third level is covered by a teal tablecloth and colourful doilies, and there are two other white candles and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The space is surrounded by orange crumpled letters that Eugenio has written but never sent to his ex-boyfriend. In the corner of the room, there’s a laundry basket and a teal shoebox—for his memories.

Photo by Ashley Harding

mine represented on the local stages, which, unfortunately, doesn’t happen often in my community.

Of course, the specificity of these characters is a double-edged sword in a province like Newfoundland and Labrador. On one hand, writing culturally specific work brings diverse bodies to the

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stage, invites local audiences to reflect on those voices that historically we haven't heard of, and puts a mirror to our current society. On the other hand, it may seem challenging to produce a play that requires culturally specific casting in a province where trained/experienced diverse talent is lacking (the reasons for that are long and would probably require an essay in and of themselves).

I see this challenge, though, as an opportunity to identify gaps in our local sector and develop strategies to bridge them.

What stories are we producing, and why? What resources are we putting in to support the professional development of culturally diverse performers?

For years, I have seen directors and producers run away from casting diversely and programming plays featuring racialized voices, or simply whitewashing characters. As one of the few racialized artistic leaders in my community with a strong and unapologetic agenda in this regard, I advocate for systemic change while leading by example. Unfortunately, I can't do this labour alone.

Culturally specific casting is—spoiler alert—hard work: an important effort in Newfoundland and Labrador (and beyond), and I exhort everyone in my community to meaningfully put the care, energy, resources, and funds forth to produce work featuring culturally specific voices and increase the pool of diverse performers.

The blindness of colour-blind casting

Rahul Varma

Having arrived as a settler immigrant, I co-founded Teesri Duniya Theatre in 1981, motivated by two factors: (1) Canada's national theatre was monochromatically white, divided into English and French. Performances in both languages represented binational, bi-colonial, and bilingual heritage, with self-definition and self-interest, acutely avoiding any severe critique of settler colonialism. Both English and French theatres have studiously ignored Indigenous peoples and treated multicultural diversity as an unequal subsidiary to date. (2) My arrival in the wake of the 1980 referendum forced me to bear witness to the growing separatist movement which claimed to liberate Quebec from English domination, something many Quebecers still perceive as a progressive and even revolutionary act. Yet they ignore how inconstant this thinking is—colonialists seeking independence from their colonial partner to free the land that did not belong to them in the first place is not independence. The separatist movement was/is no liberation—it is recolonization based on majoritarian ethnonationalism.

Teesri Duniya Theatre was a multicultural response to the binational, bicultural monopoly. The company is committed to producing politically prophetic plays which examine critical and contentious issues in order to promote progressive social change.

The company's casting practice is a significant part of that social change.

With the national conversation about anti-oppression, anti-racism, decolonization, equity, diversity, inclusion, and systemic racism, many dominant companies have begun to use colour-blind casting without considering the actors' race, culture, and

colour. Stating, "I do not see colour, and only quality matters," companies argue that colour-blind casting allows for white roles to be played by non-white actors and vice versa. However, this practice primarily privileges white actors. For example, primarily non-Asian actors played Asian roles in the 1989 London production of *Miss Saigon* and the 2012 musical adaptation of *The Nightingale*, set in ancient China. Director Richard Rose cast white actors to play Arab characters in Wajdi Mouawad's prophetic play *Scorched* (2007–2009). Philippe Ducros's otherwise-political play *L'Affiche* used white francophone actors to play Arab/Palestinian roles in Quebec. Celebrated Quebec director Robert Lepage painted the faces of white francophones to play non-white characters in *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *The Blue Dragon*, and *Zulu Time*. Mr. Lepage cast white actors to play Black characters in his most dehumanizing production to date, *SLAV*. These are but some of the many examples which I could cite here.



Counter Offence performance, March 2020. (l-r): Minoos Gundevia, Davide Chiazzese, Alida Esmail, Maureen Adelson, and Amena Ahmad. Photo by Svetla Atanasova

Colour-blind casting isn't a way to promote diversity on the stage; instead, it is an exercise in diversity management, clicking the diversity box. It is a profiteering practice to secure patronage because arts funding bodies merge demographic criteria with the aesthetic representation of race, culture, and differences. In a reverse scenario, when non-white actors play white characters expressing white experiences in stories written for the white community, they ignore and trivialize the importance of race and culture, a significant determinant of human development and global relations. Colour-blind casting compels the audience to think that race is interchangeable, which diminishes the struggle for equity against racism. Essentially, colour-blind casting promotes an assimilationist vision, suggesting that the white colonial culture is a unified whole in which non-whites have no political standing.

There is no such thing as colour-blindness. When audiences watch a play, they see the actors' colour and are concurrently made conscious of differences and power imbalances across cultures and races. For this reason, at Teesri Duniya Theatre, we reject colour-blind casting; we acknowledge true diversity, respect differences, and practise culturally appropriate and colour-conscious casting, which considers the characters' ethnicity, skin colour, race, and cultural heritage as written by the playwright. The characters who inhabit the play *Counter Offence* are Canadians of African, South Asian, Iranian, English, and French descent—the story fully unfolds only if the performers act from the specifics of their race, culture, and history. Our casting practice does not reject cultural authenticity in the name of an idealized post-racial egalitarianism that doesn't exist in a country formed by colonization. So, in the audition process for the show, the director evaluated the race, culture, and authenticity of the actors to give audiences a chance to fully appreciate the depth of the story from personal and political perspectives. Doing colour-conscious casting never compromises the craft and the quality; rather, it does the opposite: it reaches for and allows us to perceive the extent of authenticity that should always be aimed for in creating art.

However, the solution doesn't lie in colour-blind or colour-conscious casting but in creating stories written with characters of colour at the core. Slotting actors of colour into white stories and vice versa will never be as authentic as writing stories in which different characters equally coexist from the specifics of their respective cultural heritages.

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Auditions: What are they worth?

Pam Patel

I hate auditioning. In fact, I choose not to do it anymore. But I'm in a place of privilege where I can create my own work and have found my calling as an artistic director. In my position, I have almost daily conversations with racialized artists who have no choice but to audition in order to forge a career, and I often hear their experiences of being 'cast for diversity.' The effects of these experiences? Well, they lead to artists like myself, who choose to leave the auditioning circuit and learn to produce and present their own independent work. Although this is great to see, it's partially the result of a harmful cycle perpetuated by casting agencies and companies who are not doing the work to set up supportive and nurturing structures for racialized and marginalized artists. This work needs to start from the moment of our first audition.

A few years ago, I received an invitation to audition as an actor for the Stratford Festival. They were casting for a few specific

roles in a production that piqued my interest. Of course, working with this large organization was enticing for numerous reasons, so I followed up on the opportunity. I planned my travel via public transit and decided to spend the day in the neighbourhood at the local parks and cafés.

When my time neared, I walked into an enormous and empty building. I remember immediately questioning what I was doing there. I asked a couple of people for directions, and while they were friendly, I found that there was this air of rigidity that kept my head down and the banter to a minimum. I finally arrived and was told to have a seat in a makeshift waiting area that was set up in a portion of a hallway. As I watched staff and technicians walk through the waiting area, I wondered why they didn't have a room they could designate for the actors, just to try and calm their nerves. I was finally called into the audition room:

"Hi, Pam. We'd like you to read the first sides. Whenever you're ready."

The air of rigidity extended to the room. There was no greeting or opportunity for me to speak as myself. I jumped into reading the sides. As I did so, I clocked that there wasn't a single racialized person in the room except for me. The doubts I felt when I walked in the door multiplied. I was asked to stick around to read the second set of sides they had provided. I walked back into the hallway waiting room and took a seat.

It was at this moment that I took in who had accumulated in the waiting area with me. Every single actor was Black or a woman of colour. We were all here to check a box. I was invited to audition only because I was one of a handful of racialized actors within this company's network. This realization confirmed the lack of worth I felt the moment I walked through the front door. I left before they called me back into the room.

This is the typical experience of most racialized actors. The artists I speak with go through this process day in and day out, even during this time when the work seems even scarcer. But there are companies that are challenging this status quo. MT Space is one of them. The moment I connected with this company as a young actor, I knew I had found my artistic home.

I met Majdi Bou-Matar, the founder of MT Space, following his performance of *Seasons of Immigration* at Centre in the Square. My university colleague, Nick Storrington, introduced us and indicated that I was interested in auditioning for the company. I followed up with my headshot and resumé and, shortly after, was called in for an audition. I was told to set aside three hours.

I followed the detailed instructions I had received by email and walked in the back door. I was greeted by the general manager of the company, who welcomed me in and asked if I cared for some coffee or tea. They then directed me toward the washroom and the studio, where I had some time to warm up and prepare. There was one other actor with me, and I was told that MT Space held group auditions to gauge how people played together. When Majdi came into the room, he greeted us and shared a bit about his process and vision for the company. We then introduced ourselves and began by walking together in the space. From there, we experienced a 'crash course' in the devising style of the company, which included some improvisation and physical theatre. At one point, Majdi emphasized that this audition process was not just for him to see actors but also for us to know whether we would work well with him. I immediately felt valued, and I appreciated

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Pam Patel directing the X Page workshop for immigrant women in 2020 (just before the first COVID lockdown).
Photo by Sam Trieu

the relationships of reciprocity that were already being built. At the end of the audition, we were invited to share any skills that weren't brought up. I chose to do a short vocal musical improvisation. The audition wrapped up with Majdi sharing his vision for his next production, *The Last 15 Seconds*. The three hours flew by, and I was already craving more.

I met with my good friend Ruth at her home for dinner afterwards, someone who was also an artist. I remember telling her all about the experience and that it didn't matter whether I was cast or not. If all auditions were like that, I could make a career out of it. That was thirteen years ago, and I have considered MT Space my artistic home ever since.

Casting Jewish theatre: An opinion

Ari Weinberg

What does culturally specific casting mean to me?

It's all about representation in the room and the project's ethos. Do I like seeing Jewish actors in Jewish roles? Yes. Is that always possible? No, for many reasons. So I look for where the representation is throughout the production.

For me as an actor, playing Jewish roles has been some of the most meaningful work I've done onstage.

As an artistic director of a Jewish theatre, I think of everything in terms of a prism. The religious identity practices—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism—make up the three sides of the prism. Secular cultural identity and practices make up the

surface in between them, and the plays we produce are the light we shine through the prism. The many colours refracting out of the prism represent the people we reach and connect with through the work. That's a lot to carry and consider at all times, and every play is different. We have a plethora of Jewish consultants from different religious and cultural practices to help directors on any production that we engage, along with cultural consultants for any other cultural representation a work might require.



(l-r): Ari Weinberg as Mendel and Keenan Lehmann as Jason in WJT's 2018 co-production of *Falsettos*!
Photo by Keith Levit

There is a joke, "Ask two Jewish people for an opinion, you'll get three," and that's because Jewish practices are very personal and vary from community to community. So, having Jewish people in the room in various capacities allows for a piece with Jewish content to breathe in a personal and authentic way.

My analogy would be this:

Suppose you're casting a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* (yes, I'm using *Fiddler* because everyone knows it). I don't think it's possible for the entire company to be made up of Jewish actors,

but there had better be at least five or six Jewish actors in the show to help ground it in authentic representation.

But it's not just about casting. Does the director need to be Jewish? No, but they need support with consultants, some Jewish actors, and maybe a Jewish choreographer, music director, or set designer. Some people need to be there to help guide the project, to make it live authentically and not tip into caricature, and also not just to seem like they're following a textbook that says, "This is how Jewish people do things."

This, of course, is all just my opinion. Ask another Jewish theatre practitioner, and you'll get another two opinions.

Casting has always been culturally specific ... and the culture is shifting

Colin Wolf

I value specificity. So let's be specific. For me, culturally specific casting (CSC) means casting based on specific cultural requirements that are demanded by the work, and it is heavily influenced by the culture of the artists, the workplace culture of the company, and the cultural requirements of the funding bodies.

I would say *all* castings I have experienced in Canada throughout my decade in the industry as an actor, director, or artistic director have had CSC requirements: no accents, professional training, a specific identity, an unspecified identity (which is a specification in its own way), ability to speak a monologue (which goes into literacy, language, and ability to speak or hear). These are all culturally specific decisions that create a particular image to show funders through reports and the audience through performances. In my opinion, CSC is not inherently good or bad; like most things, it exists at an intersection of values, intent, action, and impact. It requires reflection and communication with those affected and participating in order to determine the effect and how we can better utilize the tool to achieve our goals, guided by our values.

An example: my sister Caleigh and I do a show called *Born Again Crow*. In it, the character of Beth *must be mixed Settler/Indigenous*. When the actor who plays Beth's mother is not Indigenous, we say the late father was Indigenous, and when the actor is Indigenous, we say the late father was white. The story demands a mixed Beth, but which of the parents is Indigenous does not matter. This is CSC with a responsive ability to add flexibility due to our challenges at the time securing an individual who met other CSC requirements of the role, such as training and experience.

Another example: *Salt Baby*, by Falen Johnson—an Indigenous show led by an Indigenous collective that has a series of

characters played by a single actor who is (as we lovingly joke) a token white guy. This is CSC—the character must be of the Canadian settler culture. With Falen's blessing, and due to the relatively low number of Indigenous professional actors available for indie touring shows, we did not cast actors to match the specific Indigenous Nations of the characters. Our value of hiring Indigenous artists committed to making theatre full-time and our geographical location as a collective of artists based out of the prairies outweighed the regionally specific Indigenous identities within the script.



Colin Wolf in *There Is Violence and There Is Righteous Violence and There Is Death, or, The Born-Again Crow*, Gwaandak Theatre, 2018. Photo by Kris Moore Photography

Since all casting will have cultural elements influencing the decision, I would offer that we treat all casting decisions with delicacy and with rigorous investigations into the context, ability, and suitability for a group to engage in that specificity. And by 'group,' I mean any of us who make plays when we make a circle.

CSC previously upheld a culture dominated by people who are not disabled, excluded, or oppressed by workplace and societal values of the time. Now, a new generation of artmakers with different values is wielding CSC to make strides in representing race, gender, and sexual identities. However, we have further to go as we investigate how our values and cultures continue to create CSC outcomes that exclude people based on ability and class.

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I ask anyone opposed to CSC as a concept, or those who think they are actually objective enough to engage in ‘blind casting,’ to reinvestigate their own projects, to identify the workplace culture, creative culture, and social culture requirements that may have gone unspoken with most casting decisions. For example, when I see audition calls for projects that occur around a ‘Canadian’ family at a dinner, wedding, or funeral, there is a cultural understanding that these people will look and sound like a family (no accents, all the same race, similar appearances)—well, this is CSC, isn’t it?

The seesaw of absurdities

Mercedes Bátiz-Benét

I’m the Artistic Director of Puente Theatre in Victoria. Our mandate is to “use theatre as a bridge between cultures” (Puente Theatre), so culturally specific casting is a constant challenge. Not only do we need to find actors who fit their roles and can command a stage, but we also need to choose them from a potentially tiny subcommunity in a small city on an island. Sometimes, it’s an impossible task, which reveals some fundamental contradictions in how we think about culture and art and our imagination.

On the one hand, we are now all intensely aware that some people in our society have been and still are excluded from our stages; we want their voices to be heard, and we most certainly don’t want their voices stolen by anybody else. Hence the sensible dictum that nobody can play a role authentically if they don’t have lived experience in that identity. A white man can’t play a Latina woman, for example.

But can *any* Latina woman play *any* Latina woman? Well, no. There is a great complexity to Latine identities (like all identities) that may not be immediately apparent to outsiders but is vivid to insiders. A Latina woman of Spanish heritage can’t play an Indigenous Latina woman. Identities fragment even further: can *any* Indigenous Latina woman play *any* Indigenous Latina woman? Well, no. Indigeneity is not monolithic, and it’s a colonial error to assume so. An Aztec is not a Mayan is not an Apache is not a Coast Salish. And a fundamental characteristic of Latinidad is *mestizaje*, the mixture of Old and New World races that goes back 500 years so that now each person is in some senses both colonizer and colonized, and teasing those histories apart is as impossible as separating the two strands of a DNA helix.

So, as the logic unfolds, it becomes apparent that nobody can authentically play anybody else. Theatre can only be a bunch of illegible diaries, with no actor capable of imagining their way into their pages, nor any audience.



Puente Theatre’s production of *Fado, the Saddest Music in the World*, 2018.

Photo by Derek Ford

Theatre depends on the idea that we can imagine what it’s like to be another human being who is different from us in some way. It is founded on empathy. That seems like a principle we can all love. But if we follow *that* logic to its inevitable conclusion, anybody could play anybody, regardless of gender, culture, race, or experience. So, we’re on a seesaw with absurdities on either end—theatre that disallows everything but autobiography, and theatre that allows everything, including brownface. Neither is tenable. We are caught between them.

In a sense, that’s what makes for interesting art. Life is in many ways a journey of learning to live with contradiction, developing the courage to hold two incompatible truths in our hands, despite their mutual fragility. And like in life, the way through is built by love—love of craft, skill, rigour, work, protocol; love of oneself; love of each other; love of our common humanity.

Work Cited

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About the Authors

Santiago Guzmán (he/him/they) is a writer, performer, director, and dramaturge originally from Metepec, Mexico, now based in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador. His work aims to put local, under-represented narratives and characters on the front lines, while inviting audiences to appreciate the vibrancy of Atlantic Canada from a diverse perspective. sguzman.ca

Born in India, Rahul Varma is a playwright and the Artistic Director of Teesri Duniya Theatre (teesriduniyatheatre.com), which he co-founded in 1981 with a vision to tell authentic stories based on the cultural experiences of visible minorities living in Canada. In 1998, with Kapil Bawa, he co-founded the theatre quarterly *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*.

Pam Patel performs with numerous Canadian companies, touring nationally and internationally. She is currently the Artistic Director of MT Space, where she pursues her passion for centralizing racialized voices through theatre. Most recently, Pam received the Emerging Leader in Performing Arts Award from Canadian arts presenting association CAPACOA and is a recipient of Zonta's 2021 Women of Achievement Award.

Ari Weinberg (he/him) has been the Artistic and Managing Director of Winnipeg Jewish Theatre since 2015 and has worked all over Canada as an actor and director.

Colin Wolf has a BFA in theatre (University of Lethbridge) and is a Métis theatremaker born in Moh'kins'tsis on Treaty 7 Territory. His work has focused on the development of new, Indigenous, and political theatre. A co-founder of Thumbs Up Good Work Theatre, he recently transitioned to Whitehorse as the new Artistic Director of Gwaandak Theatre.

Mercedes Bátiz-Benét (she/her) is a Mexican-born multi-disciplinary artist, writer, and award-winning director. Known for her emotionally potent and surrealist style, she has written, co-written, and directed numerous plays that have toured nationally and internationally. Mercedes is the artistic director of Puente Theatre where her mission is to advocate for the inclusion, representation, and development of immigrant, IBPOC, and culturally diverse voices.

Glossary Terms

colour-blind: Although the term 'colour-blind' carries ableist connotations, it is popularly used to describe the practice of attempting to ignore the race of the performers during and after

the casting process. In shows that are cast using this strategy, the performers' race does not change the race of the character they are playing and typically does not affect the world of the play. Some practitioners of colour-blind casting justify their decision by saying they wanted to cast 'the best actor in the role' regardless of their race, which has led to debates over the legitimacy of this casting strategy. This debate often includes whether or not audiences can effectively ignore the race of a performer, as bodies onstage are visible, and skin colour is identifiable. Attempting to be colour-blind can often lead to poor representation onstage and the possible erasure of racialized actors/characters' experiences.

culturally specific theatre company: This term refers to a theatre company established with a specific mandate to support the creation and production of theatre by and for people from a particular, often-marginalized cultural group. Culturally specific theatre companies are born out of a lack of representation and opportunities in mainstream theatre for artists who belong to specific cultural groups. See online feature <https://ctr.utpjournals.press/ctr/193/online-feature> about culturally specific theatre companies.

typecasting: A casting strategy that has slightly different definitions depending on the context and intent behind its use. Typecasting can involve choosing actors for roles based on generalizations about their appearance or stereotypes about the cultural or ethnic group they identify as belonging to. It can also include casting actors based on the quality and effectiveness of their performance in prior roles, which often leads to these actors continuously playing similar roles or 'types.'