



Video Story Transcript

The Importance of Representation on Our Stages: Role Models for Young Audiences

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/qmizgkjclfk>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name's Rives Collins. I teach at Northwestern University in the Department of Theater, where my specialization is theater for young audiences. So, this story, it's going to take us back a ways. Back to the early 90s or so.

I directed a play for kids. "Androcles and the Lion," is a crowd pleaser, the comedy. Androcles is known for plucking the thorn out of the paw of a lion and the lion later on returns that kindness. It's a good story. It's a story about friendship. And we were working with an organization called Urban Gateways. Urban Gateways would bus kids from underserved neighborhoods to our campus to see a play. And this student matinee was going really well. Kids were having a ball. They were laughing and cheering. And I remember, I noticed that all the kids in the audience, they were people of color and all the actors they were white. I noticed it. I didn't think much of it. And then, ah, I had this thought. I thought maybe we're sending the message to the children in the audience that someday they can grow up and come to Northwestern and be a student and be in a play and bring laughter to a whole new generation of kids. And I remember, feeling (and this is awkward to share this), I remember feeling, kind of self-satisfied. Like we were doing some kind of good deed. After the play, all the actors headed out into the lobby, still in costume, to greet the kids on their way to the buses. And when I got to the lobby I saw a huge crowd of kids had gathered around one actor. And I'm thinking to myself, "OK, so, which one of my actors has the charisma to gather a crowd like that? I think it's probably Androcles. He's the hero of the story. Nope he's over there. So maybe it's the lion. The lion's the funny guy. He's over there."

So I'm wondering which one of my actors has the star power to collect a crowd like that. And as I walk across the lobby, I see. It's our custodian. And he's standing with his vacuum cleaner. And I want to be sure you don't misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with being a custodian. I believe there's dignity in all work and not only was our custodian great at what he did, he took real pride in the fact that he'd helped his daughter through law school.

But as I saw him with all the friendly handshakes and high fives, I realized he was the only person of color that kids had seen since arriving at the university. And I understood that maybe I wasn't sending the message that someday they could grow up and be a student at Northwestern. Maybe I was sending the message that someday they could grow up and they could come to Northwestern University and they could vacuum the floors. I never intended to send that message. Never, ever. But sometimes the things we intend and the things we actually do, they're not the same.

Ok, so, fast forward with me a few years. I directed another play, "Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse." It's based on kids books by Kevin Henkes and Lilly is a mouse. She likes to wear red, cowboy boots, to carry her purple plastic purse, she's got a big imagination and she gets in trouble at school a lot. And the actress playing Lilly was a wonderful student, a college student named Niha. And after the performance, we had a question and answer period with the audience. And a little girl raised her hand and said, "I would like to ask the person pretending to be Lilly where she is from."

And Niha told the truth, "I'm from New Jersey." And she saw the palpable disappointment in the eyes of the child. So she added, "But my family came to America from India."

And that's when the little girl jumped up on her chair and she cried out, "Me too! Me too!" And the whole audience applauded and cheered.

And from this stage, Niha was beaming. And I learned something that stayed with me. I've worked to create those, "Me too," moments ever since. I believe those moments of identification, they matter. It's not enough to invite young people to our spaces as if they are tourists. As if they're outsiders seeing a place where they don't really fit in. I think instead, we want to create those empowering "Me too" moments that allow young people to imagine themselves being successful in this place. And helping them understand, in their bones, that they belong.

I'm grateful to two important teachers. One, a much loved custodian, and the other a little girl who once jumped up on her chair and cried out, "Me too!"

Thanks.