

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Nicole Smart, MPS '15, is the first-ever diversity director for the Actors' Equity theatrical union



BROADWAY BOUND:
Smart in the Theatre
District in Midtown
Manhattan

In the classic 1933 film *King Kong*, the female lead—the plucky ingénue to whom the title character loses his heart, with tragic consequences—was famously portrayed by Fay Wray. In two remakes, Jessica Lange and Naomi Watts filled Wray's stilettos—and in a musical version that premiered in Australia in 2013, the female protagonist was played by another Caucasian blonde. But when that show opened on Broadway last fall, the producers went a less traditional route: they cast an African American actress.

For Nicole Smart, MPS '15, the *Kong* casting is a sign of progress, a much-needed step toward making live theatre more racially inclusive, both onstage and behind the scenes. As the first-ever diversity director for Actors' Equity Association—the 51,000-member union for professional live theatre actors and stage managers—Smart is working to achieve that aim. For the past two years, she's been helping to implement Equity's diversity initiatives and making the case to the theatre world and beyond about the value of multi-cultural hiring. "If you're not diversifying your workforce—when it comes to directors, playwrights, casting, choosing the shows—you're not really functioning at the best of your ability as an organization," she says. "To be competitive, to have a diverse audience and be sustainable within the industry, you need to do shows that represent the demographics of our country."

Around the time of Smart's hiring in spring 2017, Equity released a study on gender and racial diversity in the theatre that made national headlines. Analyzing its members' employment from 2013 to 2015, it found that 60.9 percent of principal roles in plays (and 58.7 percent in musicals) were filled by men. Even more strikingly, 65.9 percent of principal roles in plays went to Caucasian performers, compared with 8.6 percent for African Americans, 2.1 percent for Hispanics/Latinos, and 1.6 percent for Asians. (In musicals the disparity was >



NON-TRADITIONAL CASTING: Broadway shows that have featured minority actors in roles typically filled by Caucasians include (from top) *King Kong*; *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*; and *Hamilton*.



I lived the movie *New Jack City* for the first ten years of my life in the United States," Smart says, referring to the 1991 gangster film about the New York drug trade. Her parents eventually secured union jobs—her father as a city bus driver, her mother as an assistant geriatric nurse—that allowed them to relocate to a safer part of the borough. "At a very young age, I experienced what it was like for people to be treated differently because of the way they speak, the way they look," says Smart. "I didn't understand why, but I knew it wasn't fair. I always said, 'Whatever I do in my career, I will serve as an advocate for people who are under-represented.'"

more marked, with white performers getting 70.8 percent of roles.) And as for stage management jobs? They were the least diverse of any in the union, with 74.4 percent going to Caucasians. "The study found that there are stark and pervasive barriers when it comes to employment, specifically when it comes to women and people of color—and when they are hired, they receive lesser pay," Smart notes. "It's nothing that wasn't well known, but when you have the data there's no refuting it."

(And in fact, the percentages of Caucasians employed in all jobs may have been even higher, since a significant number of Equity members don't share their race or ethnicity with the union, and were put into a separate statistical category, "not provided.")

Smart's passion for promoting diversity and inclusion stretches back to childhood, when she and her family moved from their native Trinidad to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. For a bookish young girl with a Caribbean accent, life in the impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhood wasn't easy. "I always say

She postponed full-time college for financial reasons, eventually earning a BS in leadership and management studies from NYU as a non-traditional student. While working in the legal labor department of the National Football League—a post she held for fourteen years—Smart earned a master's at the ILR school's New York City branch, through a program that offers all-day classes on Saturday (plus a two-week summer residency in Ithaca). After spending nearly a year working in leadership development and inclusion with the NCAA in the Midwest, she found the job wasn't a good fit and ultimately moved back home to New York

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and began the Equity gig. She observes that her work is informed, in a small way, by her own brief experience as a performer: in 2000 she appeared in two Off-Off-Broadway shows, including one lead role. "I'm proud to say that I've done it—and it's actually connected to what I do right now," Smart says. "Seeing everything that goes into putting a production together gives you a level of respect for it. And experiencing that storytelling—it shows you how theatre has an amazing influence on society." ■

— L.P. Drew

PHOTOS: PROVIDED