

Putting Actors in Boxes: A Study of Typecasting and its Effects

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ABSTRACT

“Putting Actors in Boxes: A Study of Typecasting and its Effects” discusses how gender is perceived in theatre; in characters and in actors, and the influences of each on the other. Research was conducted in hopes of aiding actors and entertainers with finding work as well as helping the public with seeing and accepting themselves in the media. To that end, this topic is pertinent as it reveals the ways in which, in certain environments, student actors have a much wider range of available roles than professional actors. After conducting extensive research, many questions inevitably arise, which can largely be summed up into “how does the practice of typecasting simultaneously reinforce and undermine the construction of gender identities in theatre, and what are the resulting psychological and economic implications?” In pursuit of greater knowledge, mixed methods research was employed in addition to extensive literature review; qualitative data was gathered via interviews of professionals in the theatre industry, including Ryan Bernard Tymensky csa and a former Broadway actor turned college theatre professor who preferred to remain anonymous, quantitative data was gathered through surveys conducted among the student theatre community at FSH, NDHS, and St. Francis. The sum of research concludes typecasting is a toxic systemic practice prevalent in the professional theatre industry, and although typecasting still occurs in the secondary school environment, it is largely not as problematic or damaging. This study proposes that advocacy and compulsory diversity education programs for all professionals in the theatre industry would play a pivotal role in mitigating the impact of typecasting on actors – dialogue is powerful, and being open to conversation is the first step in major change.

INTRODUCTION

Student actors, especially at historically single-sex schools, are not limited in what roles they may audition for in drama. A cisgender straight girl could play the male romantic lead to a nonbinary bisexual student's female romantic lead. The same applies to roles of certain ethnicities or religions; due to the nature of school productions and "having to work with what you have," oftentimes actors will cross religions or age or ethnicity in addition to blurring gender lines. However, in the professional world, performers are often limited to roles that fit their identities perfectly. This is called typecasting, which is a normalized and expected practice of casting an actor in a role according to their "type," as in, finding qualities of the character in the actor and casting accordingly. However, when people engage in this practice, they are reflecting mass culture and its use of stereotypes. It is notable that the very idea of "type" is in direct contrast with the foundation of performance as actors continue to be cast in roles that pigeonhole and objectify them to a certain type. Unfortunately, actors are often taught to conform and embrace their type as they "will have the best chances/opportunities" if they stick to their predetermined "box". Typecasting defines and gives a bit of insight into the problematic and prevalent practice of pigeon-holing actors into specific and constrained boxes. It describes how performers are limited in role availability and choice as well as continue to be judged based on appearance and personality-based factors. For example, an actress's 'value' and talent is commonly tied to their sexual-desirability. Additionally, the distinction of female versus male actors begins in training, even in compliments from instructors (visual/aesthetic versus abstract).

After extensive research, questions inevitably arise, for example, how is gender perceived in theatre? And how does it have an impact on the roles available to actors? What is typecasting and how does it affect an actor's psyche and livelihood? How are women perceived in acting

versus men (and what about non-binary actors)? At what point does allowing for a wider range of actors for a wider range of characters become cultural appropriation or an issue of “true” representation? And, how can the entertainment industry change to create roles more accessible to everyone or to allow actors into more roles?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The material studied and analyzed has focused on typecasting and other possible types of casting and their subsequent impacts. This research has examined the relationship between realistic theatre and feminism, objectification, the psyche of the actor, and attempts of women to gain any semblance of power in addition to many other techniques to overcome hegemonic theatrical practices – and how all have failed; yet, evidence highlights how feminism cannot move forward until there are no longer discriminatory and objectifying images throughout the media. Additional literature review opened the conversation of “typecasting” to include more than just gender as well as proposed solutions and the consequences of creating a more open and welcoming community and society. Humanity is found in pain and joy, similarities and differences – experiences which form the heart of theatre. Further investigation provides examples and evidence of double standards and analyzes the link between acting student and instructor to provide possible solutions for negative relationships.

Through Noelle Scarlett’s research in *The Truth About Casting: An Analysis of Typecasting in the Boston Theatre Market*, four consistent “codes” from various casting directors become apparent: “Identity”, “Decisive Factors”, “Relationships”, and “Roles”. “Identity” refers to the personal and physical features of an actor that casting directors evaluate. “Decisive factors” indicate outside effects that do not impact the actor but do impact casting decisions (ie.

money, company policy, etc.). “Relationships” describe the prevalence of networking and how an actor is considered more or less credible depending on their references and contacts. “Roles” extrapolates on the representation and stories seen on stage. Conclusion: typecasting is central and widespread in theatre and 1) continues to work as a judgment of appearance and 2) now involves the assessment of personality. As ideal as the new shift to honoring diversity and authenticity is, it unfortunately also “contributes to typecasting as it demands realism, and draws upon the raw qualities of an actor that make them a cookie cutter version of the character in question” (Scarlett).

Towards Gender Inclusive Representation in the Theatre: The Actor and the Spectator by Jeannette Thomas explores how realistic theatre, while often in contrast with feminist ideals as well as questions of representation and stereotypes, can be used to aid the feminist movement if manipulated correctly. “Realistic” theatre is actually the perspective of the playwright on the world, not the world as it truly is. Thomas illustrates “language and representation are greatly influenced by the conception that man is central to human experience, and woman is therefore forced to envision herself within this male oriented framework” (Thomas 27). Because of this, theatre also conforms to the idea that man is central and woman is “other” and limits the ways women might find themselves represented in theatre. A female viewer only has three options (the oppressed, the oppressor (wherein she becomes compliant), or to objectify the female performer and contribute to her own commodification) when attempting to empathize with a character. A resistant spectator is necessary to begin a conversation about the reality created by the text.

Amberly Chamberlain’s *The Naked Truth: An Examination of Gender Bias in the Field of Acting* discusses how many young female actresses associate “being revealing” with physical nakedness whereas young men tend to correlate the same phrase with emotional exposure while

analyzing the long-term effects of dehumanization and objectification, including on the feminist movement. Chamberlain continues to discuss ways women have attempted to subvert society and find ways to find power, and yet continue to fail; such as Mary Wollstoncraft who “held the belief that women were inherently inferior to men [and ...] that women needed to strive to be like “man”, the ideal being” (Chamberlain 16) as well as analyzing how, in the western world, “women have used the only power they could to become a part of that “privileged caste,” reducing themselves to be objectified for their parts and preyed upon by men” (Chamberlain 17), extrapolating on the concept of the power of sex and “sex sells”. Unfortunately, the entertainment industry exploits the concept and continues to “define women in relation to man and not herself” (Chamberlain 17). Until women can feel empowered to say no to revealing and dehumanizing roles, women will be unable to move the fight for equality forward. Additionally, there are extensive and damaging double-standards that exist in film, even in their ratings, that stem from and contribute to the dehumanization of women. Chamberlain discusses the ‘importance’ of an actress’s sexual-desirability as it determines their ‘bankability’ and whether or not they will land a role. Many actresses have highlighted that their careers only began once they became a sex symbol. This is unfortunately reflected in Oscar and Academy Award recipients and communicates that “in order to prove that an actress is good at what she does, she must be prepared to get naked, on all levels” (Chamberlain 26). While male actors are expected to bare their soul (and win awards for doing so), female actors are expected to bare both body and soul. This requirement leads a young actress to one conclusion “get naked or get out” (Chamberlain 30). A teacher and student should maintain professionalism and boundaries while navigating emotional material. A teacher should guide an actor out of their comfort zone, but not so far that the actor’s personal boundaries are disregarded. This unnecessary push can have a negative

effect on a person as they erase the lines that once defined them; it is an actor's individuality that makes any character unique. Chamberlain believes that the best way to empower young actresses is to have them write their own material as it helps them learn themselves and hold the power over the performance and interpretation. She concludes that an actress becomes an artist when they learn they can be fully exposed without being physically revealing – and that if they choose to do so, it is on their own terms.

Richard Schechner affirms that not only is race free, gender free, body-type free, and age free casting possible, but a gateway to a world where audiences engage with a performance in new and deeper ways and opens up a performer's range massively in his work, "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting." Schechner examines the two kinds of race free, gender free, body-type free, age free casting; mixed/blind casting and intercultural casting. Typically, educational theatre environments use mixed casting due to all of the different students participating. However, because the theatre companies of America resemble the audience's values and attitudes, "traditional" casting is preferred by-and-large because the audience's expectation of performance is "'naturalistic' (or 'realistic') – this predetermined desire leads viewers to want a clear definition 'of who the performer is to who the performer wants'" (Schechner 6). Schechner calls for "radical flexibility" in race, gender, body-type and age but recognizes that in theatre, any gap between actor and character must be justified to the audience – a limitation of western viewers. He analyzes Brecht's *Verfremdung*, where the tension between "player and played" is used as a creative device to further the message of the story and emphasizes that "a role does not equal a person but is rather a summation of the role's own historical eruption, placement, and continued development" (Schechner 7). Schechner argues for several different responses in theatre: 1. When it matters for race, gender, etc. to be perceived, 2.

When they are perceived but it doesn't matter, 3. When they shouldn't be perceived because viewers have been trained to be bias-free. He proposes a flexibility which "allows for situation-specific decisions when regarding when to use, when to ignore, and when to not see race, gender, age, and body type" (Schechner 10). The results of such a flexibility would be developing representation strategies that would not be impacted by others attempting to manipulate them, performers would be able to play a multitude of roles, viewers would be encouraged to engage with the performance more actively, and both audiences and performers would be able to view race, gender, body-type, and age as "flexible, historically conditioned categories" (Schechner 10).

In "Gender and Performance: Theatre/Dance/Technology," Anna Furse analyzes the theatrical contributions of many females in the performance field and compliments how they "establish a place and space from which to question norms of mainstream hegemonic theatrical practice" (Furse 2-3) and interrogates how "intimacy" becomes null and void in performance as all becomes known to the audience. She critiques that there are so many arguments that there is no consensus for "what it means to be 'a feminist artist'" (Furse 3). Despite the promise of applied theatre practices (the practice of using theatre-based techniques as tools to discover and learn and create change), Katherine Low's workshop proved that as much as the leader might try to shift the thinking of the participants, they are an outsider who cannot control the outcome, or its consequences. She also investigates Maria Chatzichristodoulou (or Maria X)'s analysis of the word "intimacy" and how, in performance, the "private" is made "public" and becomes "invested with political potentiality" (Furse 4). Furse concludes that regardless of attempts to question traditional theatre practices, a lot of uncertainty continues to exist over how feminism works in

the theatrical field and as much as someone might try to aid in catalyzing change, they are still unknown to the group and ultimately useless.

In “The Space Between: Using Peer Theater to Transcend Race, Class, and Gender,” Venessa Bowers and Patrice Buzzanell recall their experience with Peer Theatre alongside a group of inner city students of color. Bowers highlights that it is the differences in people and experiences that make them human and allow them to reach out to one another. Despite hardships, the guidance and community of the Peer Theater group taught self-confidence and self-belief that could not have been found previously – they found the stories within themselves. Buzzanell and Bowers feature three themes: “experiencing the dialogic moment, sustaining tensions and contradictions, and empowering women and other marginalized members of society” (Bowers, Buzzanell 38). The most important point underscored in Bowers and Buzzanell’s writing is that systematic “issues always impact people’s location in society” (Bowers, Buzzanell 38), but that creativity and communication are powerful tools which can be used to bridge historical gaps. The experience of the Peer Theatre Group conquered boundaries set by previous generations to become more than before.

Ryan Donovan’s *Broadway Bodies: Casting, Stigma, and Difference in Broadway Musicals Since "A Chorus Line"* investigates “identities historically denied the chance to play themselves onstage” (Donovan 287) and the indifference Broadway has towards the effects on the people during/after the casting process. The casting system is toxic as actors often find themselves ‘unqualified’ for simply having traits which casting teams decide are unemployable. Donovan interrogates casting as a large site of power relations and as a reflection of US society values. He also spotlights the economic and labor consequences of the behavior of casting teams at large. “The labor concerns around casting tend to be subsumed under ‘artistic license,’ i.e., the

creative team's prerogative" (Donovan 3) – usually related to appearance. In looking at various options for casting, Donovan pronounces 'blind casting' as a practice which only reinforces disability as a metaphor and instead advocates for 'open casting' alongside Richard Schechner. Although there has been progress in racial and ethnic diversity onstage due to the over-representation of whiteness, no, if any, progress has been made in representing bodies and other identities beyond the norm. Not only must an actor present a finished piece and a pleasant attitude in order to have a chance at a role, but they must also match what the casting breakdown asks for in terms of physical characteristics. Interestingly, Donovan quotes and questions the official casting rules as set by the Actors' Equity Association. The Association goes so far as to request more information from the casting team on role-type so that actors "are able to 'type themselves' prior to attending [...] auditions" (Donovan 7). Not only is this incredibly damaging for an actor's mentality and livelihood, but it also reveals the intersection of aesthetics, bodies, and labor. Often, the 'best person for the role' might not even be found because of the restrictions placed by the casting team on identity-based attributes. Donovan highlights Lennard Davis in his quote, "In what other profession would it be acceptable to discriminate against an identity and get away with it?" He argues for the previously excluded to have the right to hold the same extensive range of roles as those who have historically held power. Although performance shifts constantly just like identity, historical toxic and systemic practices have continued for far longer than they should've.

Overall, despite the growth Broadway has historically undergone and the many who have tried to push through the damaging practices, there is still a ways to go before it can truly be considered 'diverse' and 'inclusive.' Discussion, respect, and a mutual understanding of

humanity are the first steps towards a better future – one where casting takes the leap, breaks type, and destigmatizes differences.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“Putting Actors in Boxes: A Study of Typecasting and its Effects” discusses how gender is perceived in theatre; in characters and in actors, and the influences of each on the other. This project falls under the umbrellas of (1) social construction of gender in the entertainment industry, (2) gender and media, and (3) intersectionality – relating how any and all identities (race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) an actor has can and do impact each other and the actor. This topic is pertinent as it reveals the ways in which, in certain environments, student actors have a much wider range of available roles than professional actors – examining the extent to which typecasting exists at all levels.

METHODS

In the pursuit of greater conclusions, mixed methods research was employed. Arie Levine of the Pasadena Playhouse Educational Department shared the contact information of Ryan Bernard Tymensky, a casting director, and a Broadway actress turned college acting professor who preferred to remain anonymous, providing qualitative data gathered via interviews of professionals in the theatre industry. Interview questions focused on specific personal experiences with typecasting as well as the interviewees approach in combating the systemic practice. A survey of quantitative data was conducted separately among the student theatre community at Flintridge Sacred Heart (FSH), St. Francis, and Notre Dame High School (NDHS) in Sherman Oaks to ensure an accurate impression of secondary school theatre environments by

engaging with historically all-girls, all-boys, and co-ed schools. Employing two methods of research increased the amount of data collected and revealed both correlations and differences in the secondary school environment and the professional industry.

RESULTS

There were two interviews conducted to provide qualitative data, first with the Broadway actress turned collegiate professor who preferred to remain anonymous. She commented on her personal experience as an actress, as a professor, and on the overall state of the industry. Recounting her personal typecast; “I was also very much cast as the blonde bimbo, like stupid, dumb. It was always interesting when people would be surprised I had an opinion or a degree,” she describes how the pervasiveness of typecasting seeps even into other people’s expectations of personal character outside of the role. Additionally, she comments, similar to Amberly Chamberlain’s observations, in breakdowns (also known as character description lists), men are commonly described by their personality traits (i.e. “the intelligent Ivy league, the heart on his sleeve”) whereas women are usually described by their physical characteristics (i.e. very fit, blonde, bimbo). Despite the historic manner of encouraging actors to adhere to a prescribed ‘type’, she is adamantly against this practice and advocates for mobility in roles: “I’ve had to push, push, push to get in there, but that has then generated way more work for me than staying in one lane.” Yet she also recognizes that the industry is not structured to allow for such flexibility, “I think it takes a lot of bravery and a lot of willingness to go up against the grain. [But] I think the reward on the other side is a lot of joy and fun.” Her experience as a professor, although there is a lot of work (including neutral scenes) to reach a comfortable place with her students, she is satisfied that she “[doesn’t] ever go into [her] classes and feel like there’s a lot of

unlearning that has to happen and trust building that has to happen in the class” – a promising observation for the future generation of theatre performers. Her overall perspective is “that typing is lazy. And, ultimately it's a way [...] to categorize people, and people don't fit into a binary, period.” People exist on a spectrum of identities, and so should characters. As a proposed solution, she discussed the importance of conversation and ensuring everyone is comfortable with asking questions; “we're all trying to actually be in conversation with one another and we're all going to make mistakes. We're going to, we're all learning a new way of being.” Growth doesn't happen overnight, and learning from mistakes is a powerful tool.

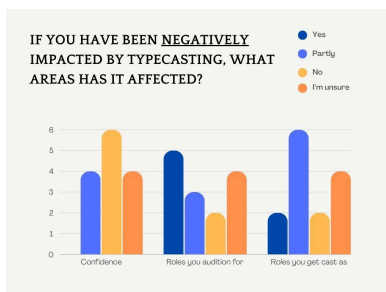
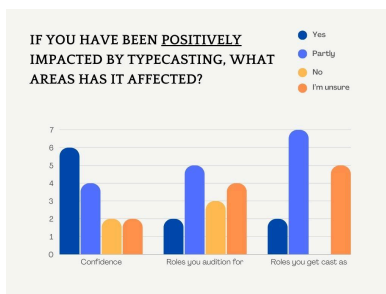
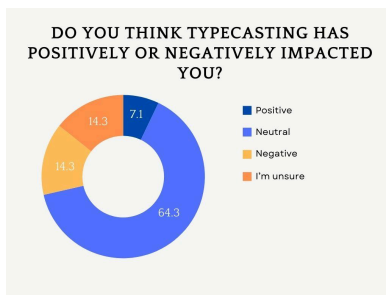
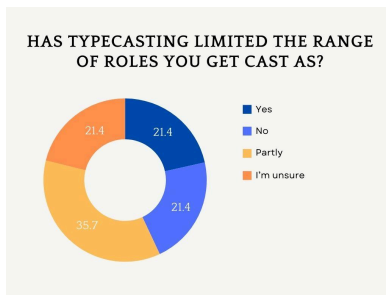
A lot of interesting topics were raised in discussion with the second interviewee, Ryan Bernard Tymensky, csa. who illustrated the state of affairs in casting teams and what, exactly, a casting director's responsibilities are. He started off the interview by clarifying that, although a casting director's opinions are valued, “at the end of the day, I didn't write it. I'm not directing it. I didn't produce it. So that's kind of where the buck stops.” However, just because the casting director serves the team does not mean that their responsibilities end there. He emphasized that while, yes, all those things are true, so is inciting conversation around other casting options and flexibility. He, himself, is constantly aware of the historical limitations of casting and makes sure to “push constantly in a respectful way to encourage people to think outside of their life experience and to think outside of the box and to not put actors in boxes because [...] when you put an actor in a box, it's oversimplifying that character and that actor, and I don't think it behooves the storytelling at all.” Tymensky's personal experience with encouraging his team to consider performers they might not have before highlights the positive impact a casting director can have on a work if they are unafraid to try and broaden the possible casting options – “I push for that because I think that's part of my responsibility, not only to the industry, but to myself and

to all the actors.” Similar to the previous interviewee, Tymensky is adamantly against encouraging actors to lean into a particular ‘type,’ going so far as to say “I think type is a word that was created for people in power or people that are trying to teach the art of acting to simplify something and to give an answer to actors where an answer is non-existent,” spotlighting the impact of the people who have historically held power and the necessity for greater perspective and thinking – something Tymensky believes the younger generation of creatives are ushering in. Tymensky stresses the importance of recognizing performers as multifaceted people and the damage of simplifying actors down to singular characteristics, “I am this person and I exist in the world and I am an actor and I am being told that me existing in the world is a type. [...] I am more than that. I am multifaceted. I am more than my race. I am more than my gender. I am more than my sexuality. I am more than looking clean cut. I am more than this haircut.” These characteristics are not all identity-based, some are physical and some are things impossible to change, but the significance of recognizing an actor as a human and not a live version of a character goes a long way in creating real change towards a positive and healthy environment. In the long run, Tymensky “[thinks] the key to all of this is being comfortable and having the knowledge and the expertise to be able to have educated, eye-opening conversations with your producers, your directors, and the people involved.”

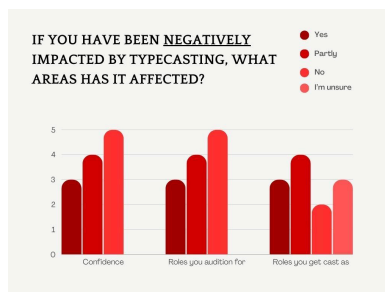
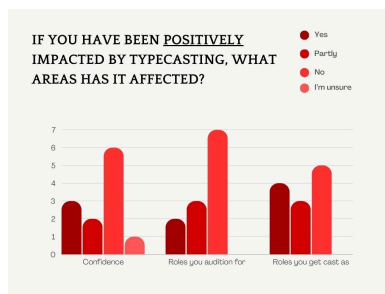
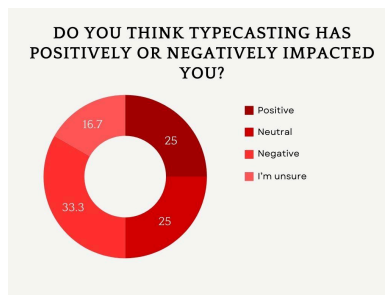
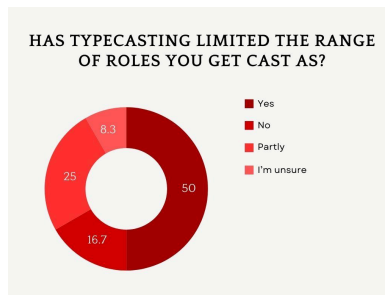
Both interviewees proposed similar solutions. The first discussed the importance of discussion and creating a comfortable space where “more diversity in storytelling” would be the ultimate goal. Tymensky also brought up conversation as a tool for progress, “that’s what causes change, is people speaking up and people bringing attention to things, [...] because nobody wins, nobody wins when something is avoided that needs to be spoken about.” Conversation and consultation are the first steps in building a better world for creatives and the rest of society.

Although the survey inquired about various items, the most poignant results are highlighted here. A note on the St. Francis survey: only two students responded, yet the data still yields very interesting results. The student who responded with more negative responses (in order: yes, negative, I'm unsure (x3) and yes (x3)) stated they identified with they/them pronouns and with a sexuality under the LGBTQ+ umbrella compared to the student with the overall more positive responses who identified with he/him pronouns (at a historically all-boys school) and with a sexuality not under the LGBTQ+ umbrella – revealing the ways in which marginalized groups are more targeted and impacted by typecasting. Additionally, FSH students (of a historically all-girls high school) agree typecasting has limited them, compared to NDHS which is much more impartial. Yet, an analysis of the rest of the results illustrate that FSH students are more likely to be negatively impacted by typecasting in all areas of inquiry, standing in stark contrast to NDHS students who continue to be overwhelmingly neutral aside from affirmations of positively affected confidence and negatively impacted audition roles. Taking into consideration the co-ed nature of NDHS (likely the catalyst for the “balance” seen in the data) juxtaposed with the historically all-girls FSH further develops the claim of typecasting impacting marginalized groups (in this case, women) to a greater extent than those who align with the historical powers.

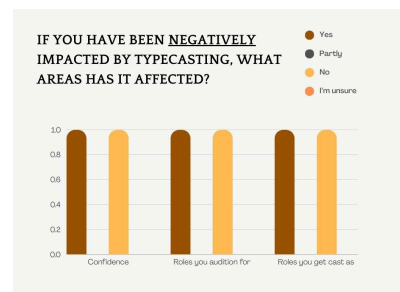
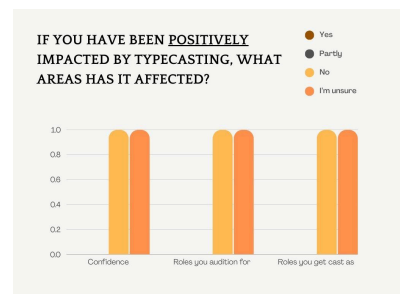
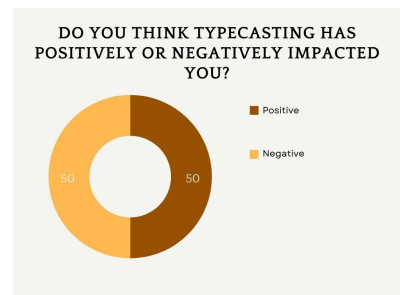
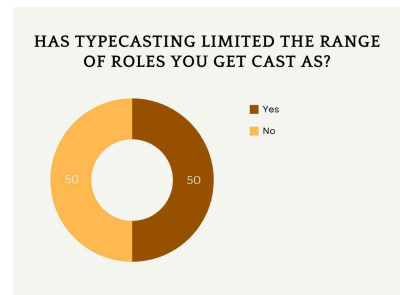
Notre Dame High School



Flintridge Sacred Heart



St. Francis High School



CONCLUSION

Typecasting is a pervasive technique damaging to an actor's livelihood and psyche. Despite the corrosive effects of typecasting stemming from historical discrimination and stereotyping, progress is being made, however slowly, towards significant growth and change.

Although secondary school theatre settings are positive sites for transformation and discovery, typecasting is a toxic systemic practice prevalent in the professional theatre industry. Students in high school have more opportunities for exploration as well as optimism for their future career. College students require some assistance to get to a comfortable place of discovery and mobility, but are given the space to grow. The professional theatre industry is seeped in typecasting and rigidity, “founded on that discrimination” (Tymensky), so much so that progress requires a significant amount of time and effort – but time and effort which is willingly given. It all begins with a conversation; change is possible, and has already begun, but crucial damage control (found in discussion and questions and discovery) needs to happen to even attempt to undo and rectify historical wrongs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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