

Shaping Change

An Interview with Leah Harris, Program Manager, The Theatre Leadership Project

EDITORS' NOTE Leah Harris is a theater practitioner with years of experience in education, community engagement, artistic producing and program management. She received her bachelor's in Theater Arts, with a focus on directing and education, from St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas. Shortly upon receiving her bachelor's degree, she returned to Dallas and joined the Education & Engagement team at Tony Award Winning Dallas Theater Center (DTC) and began to focus her work on community engagement and partnerships, while gradually laying the groundwork for Public Works Dallas, a participatory, community engaged program for all citizens of Dallas. Harris served as the Public Works Dallas Manager until 2019, when she transitioned into the role of Director of Community Engagement at Milwaukee Repertory Theater. She has presented at numerous universities in Texas on racial equity in the arts and community engagement practices. Currently, Harris is the Program Manager for The Theatre Leadership Project, which specifically aims to transform the commercial producing space on Broadway by supporting Black leadership in key management roles. Harris is also a 2020/2021 Arts & Culture Leaders of Color Fellow with Americans for the Arts.



Leah Harris

What was the vision for creating The Theatre Leadership Project and how do you define its mission?

The vision for TTLP is baked into our mission. We envision a thriving, equitable and reflective body of leadership working across our commercial industry. Within that vision, we acknowledge that the opportunity to be viewed as a leader in this space hasn't always been afforded to non-white people. As Black, Indigenous and People of Color continue to

trend towards becoming the global majority, it is imperative that our leadership reflects that change. We know that white, homogenous leadership does not yield fair opportunities for Black and Brown individuals in our field, nor is it sustainable for the continued growth and innovation that is so desperately needed right now as we emerge from this pandemic. It is essential to move beyond embracing the notion of change to creating the space to shape change. TTLP's mission is to create lasting change in the American Theatre by installing BIPOC leadership in the industry. I'm so inspired by our mission and our focus on changing how we view and create pathways to leadership within the commercial theater industry. For me, our mission can be defined by our ability to successfully support, mentor and authentically engage with the next generation of BIPOC leaders. I feel fortunate that we're able to envision this work through thoughtful partnerships,

dedicated supporters and founding members who are committed to using their influence for long-term change.

How is TTLP working to create lasting change in the American Theatre by installing BIPOC leadership in the industry?

The "how" behind TTLP is twofold. We administer multiyear fellowships that offer enhanced financial resources and critical networking opportunities across the field. Additionally, we look to financially support the work of smaller, BIPOC led initiatives that are mission aligned. Within that, we aim to make networking and intentional relationship building integral to our fellows' experience. When assessing the needs for the success of this program, we looked at what is already being offered and what opportunities we had to offer something different. The biggest takeaways in our research were that multiyear support and sustained funding are integral in retaining leaders in our field. Part of our philosophy in establishing TTLP was to ensure that there was built in financial sustainability for all fellows; therefore, a \$50,000 salary, full health benefits and additional bespoke funds for individual needs are all a part of our offering.

Presently, TTLP has supported Black Theatre Coalition's work of six new, emerging Black General Management fellows working across some of the leading Broadway GM offices. Most of those fellows relocated to New York, with direct financial support from TTLP. We're supporting a new Black Creative Producer,

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ORGANIZATION BRIEF Focused on producing, general management, company management and stage management, The Theatre Leadership Project (theatreleadershipproject.org) seeks to transform and strengthen American theatre by investing in mentorships, training, job placement, and long-term support for Black creatives in key leadership positions. TTLP will provide a compensation package, including healthcare and a moving stipend, and will have funds available for additional bespoke needs that address barriers to participation for chosen candidates. Through intentional partnerships with mainly Black-led organizations, TTLP is committed to helping bring about the change that is needed in the field. The Theatre Leadership Project is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.

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through our partnership with Columbia’s Prince Fellowship, and more specifically, we are enhancing their experience – which is typically one year – by offering two additional years of sustained funding and lasting connections in the industry. This Creative Producer will be the first out of three we’ll be supporting. Our Company Management offering is linked to our participation as an approved program with New York State as a qualifying diversity and arts job training program for the state’s \$100 million New York City Musical and Theatrical Production Tax Credit, a two-year program designed to accelerate the return of entertainment and tourism industries devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, we are still dreaming and designing our Stage Management offering to ensure we’re funding programs that serve the needs of BIPOC stage managers.

How did TTLP adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

TTLP was founded shortly after the summer of 2020, so in a lot of ways, the industry wide pause caused by the pandemic allowed the TTLP founders the necessary time to really assess the needs, raise the funds and secure partnerships for the program. We feel fortunate that by the time Broadway re-opened in September of 2021, we had fellows in place at six different leading Broadway General Management offices and one at Columbia University through our Creative Producer program. What an exciting and informative time to enter the industry.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of TTLP’s efforts?

That’s a good question. I do believe that metrics are important in telling our story, but we have to investigate that even more. Outside of saying that TTLP has contributed X number of BIPOC leaders on Broadway, we have to look at the depth of their experience and how we’ve eradicated systems that have kept Black folks out in the first place. The homogenous body of leadership that has been allowed to govern Broadway is not reflective of America in 2022. Therefore, in a lot of ways, our directive is clear – get more diverse bodies in those positions. However, in order to make lasting change in the American Theatre, TTLP is committed to ensuring that our fellowships offer financial stability, networking opportunities and time to learn, fail, challenge and question the ways in which we work. TTLP was never meant to be a crash course in theatrical leadership/management. The reason why our fellowships are multiyear is because we believe in depth over breadth in our support of fellows. By focusing our resources on a smaller number of individuals over a longer period of time, we can have a deeper impact on their professional development. So yes, we want to ensure job placement for our fellows, but we also want to ensure we are developing leaders who are whole, valued and ready to sustain a career in the industry.

Did you always know that you were attracted to nonprofit work and what excited you about the opportunity to join The Theatre Leadership Project?

I didn’t. Going into my undergraduate career, I thought I was going to be a High School Theatre Director because I wanted to direct plays and big musicals. After graduating, I started working as a teaching artist at Dallas Theater Center and since then, I’ve been working full time in nonprofit regional theater-making across education, community programming and artistic producing departments. I’ve met some of the best artists and collaborators over the past seven years of working across nonprofits – it really does become about the people you meet and the connections you make.

The opportunity to join TTLP excited me because of its newness and the opportunity to co-create something from the ground up, particularly at a time when Broadway was trying to recover from the pandemic and make good on the promise for a more equitable and just field. Additionally, I was eager to investigate how this nonprofit model lives within a for-profit commercial world. So much of what happens in the commercial sector impacts the regions and vice versa, so I feel fortunate to have the experience of working in both under my belt.

How do you define success for TTLP?

For me, success for TTLP will look like a few different things. I also think I’m constantly evolving my definition of success. First, speaking more long term, in a few years, seeing fellows who have gone through our programs starting to become leaders in their own right and beginning to take root on Broadway will be a marker of TTLP’s success. Within that, I’m excited to see how our fellows build community with one another and how they support each other. Secondly, I am eager to see how other organizations and adjacent programs start to adapt to fill the needs of emerging leadership. I believe that our methodology of multiyear, sustained support for pathways to leadership can absolutely serve as inspiration for a model for other disciplines in arts and culture spaces to sustainably grow a more reflective body of leadership. Lastly, I believe we have to envision the world we aspire to live in, and eventually our ultimate success will mean that programs like TTLP won’t have to exist and be so necessary. So much of this work is aiming to correct the exclusionary systems, practices and policies that have kept marginalized groups out of decision-making power. Therefore, an industry that no longer relies on those systems and promotes true equity will feel successful. ●

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