



**We Have a Problem: Pay Inequity
Diep Tran's 2017 MATC Keynote Address, Houston, TX**

Diep Tran: Thank you all for this opportunity, to the Mid America Theatre Conference, to Peter Campbell, Chris Woodworth for the invitation, and Ming Peiffer for introducing us. When I was first asked to speak in front of you, my first thought was: “But I’m not a theatre person!” Yes, you laugh, but it’s true. Prior keynote speakers Oskar Eustis, Rajiv Joseph, Anne Bogart—those are theatre people. I’m just a journalist. I’m someone who complains about theatre on Twitter. I don’t even have a degree in theatre. And, fun fact, I didn’t see my first live theatre performance until I was 14. It was *The Lion King*. I liked it; I didn’t love it.

But these days, I do love theatre. Enough that I’m at the theatre three to four times a week, even when I’m not covering a show. It’s a pure love, based merely on the fact that all I want is a play that makes me feel, think, or—my favorite feeling—uncomfortable. So you’re probably wondering: Diep, if you’re not a theatre artist, why are you here?

Part 1: How I Got Into Theatre

There’s a saying in journalism: if you’ve written three articles about a given subject, that makes you an expert.

At my job at *American Theatre* magazine, I like to say that I get paid to think about theatre all day. I get paid to think about exciting artists and productions we should cover. I get paid to follow the hottest trends on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regionally. And I get paid to look forward—how can the industry better serve its artists, its audiences? How can it be relevant today? And the more I write about this field, the more I learn about it, the more I appreciate it.

To me, theatre is special; it can be at once hyperlocal, and also national. It can be as small as friends performing in a room for each other or as big as a 1,000-seat Broadway house. It can be a show that's impactful to just a small community of people, or it can sweep the nation like *Hamilton*. It can be both non-profit and commercial. Not all plays are all things to all people, but theatre can be *so many* different things to so many different people.

With other art forms like film, television, or visual art, you need equipment: lights, cameras, canvases, screens, brushes. But with theatre, you just need two things: words and bodies. To me, theatre is the most democratic art form—no surprise considering it was created alongside democracy.

And now, I must remind you once again, I am not a theatre artist. In fact, I had never planned to be a theatre artist, or really any kind of artist. When I was a teenager, I once had a thought that it would be quite nice to become a Broadway star, or a novelist. I loved to sing, and to write. But luckily, I also suffered from stage fright and was a shit public speaker.

I also knew—I'm not sure how I knew, perhaps it was intuition—that becoming an artist would be hard. That I would not get many opportunities. That the entertainment industry would not welcome me. I'm not sure how I knew that. Maybe it was because in a sea of Patti

Lupones, Judy Kuhns, Bernadette Peters, there was only one Lea Salonga. That the people I saw onstage and onscreen rarely looked like me. That the books I read in school, the classics, were rarely written by people like me: people who were poor, of color, and an immigrant. For many underprivileged kids, this is a common feeling. When you're a minority kid, you need examples so that you know certain avenues are possible for you. And I did not come from a gambling family. I came from a family of immigrants who moved to Anaheim, California in 1990. My first memories were of us living in a house with my uncle's family and my grandparents. There were 14 of us in the house at that time and, until I was nine, I shared a bedroom and bed with my three older sisters.

So I had dreams; I was creative. But I wasn't reckless. The arts gave me hope—made me see that the world was big and filled with possibilities. But in my mind, I could not justify pursuing a life in the arts. But I knew that I wanted to be a writer. So I compromised. I decided to be a journalist. That way, I can tell stories, write, and—most importantly—get paid for it. Granted, this was in 2007, before journalism became as unsustainable a career path as theatre. In fact, journalism and the arts aren't so different. For one, both industries are dependent on unpaid labor. Before I was paid for my writing, I spent many years writing for free. Also, both industries have diversity problems. For instance, just look at theatre critics around the country. How many theatre critics of color can you name who are full-time journalists? At *American Theatre* magazine, we counted a total of six writers of color covering theatre full-time, plus me.

But I was lucky. I had a particular knack for covering the arts. Even though I did not want to be an artist, I loved the arts. I have the art history and English degree to prove it. And if I couldn't make a career in the arts, I could definitely make a career writing about the arts. So in

2011, as a fresh-faced graduate from journalism school, I was hired at *American Theatre* magazine. And here I am now.

Part 2: Let's Talk About Money

Recently, I visited my family in California. On the ride to the airport, my mother said to me, “You write about such an expensive pastime. Only rich people go to the theatre.”

Now why would she say such a thing? Is it because she's never gone to see a play, except the one time and it was because I had written the play and because tickets were free? Is it because the average ticket price on Broadway is more than \$100, which is about what my parents spend every week on food? Is it because in order to be an artist, you have to choose to be poor, if only for a while? And for immigrants like my family, whose entire goal in coming to America is to escape poverty, choosing poverty is a luxury many of us do not have.

How did theatre, which in its essence is people in a room telling stories to each other, become this thing that is so inaccessible to so many? In my career at *American Theatre* magazine, I have made it a mission for myself to tear apart that assumption. Theatre should be an art form for all people—white, black and brown, rich and poor, young and old. I have written articles upon articles about representation, racial diversity, gender diversity. And I have also written about something especially taboo: money.

I think a lot about money. When I was first hired at *American Theatre* as an assistant and made \$30,000 a year, I thought *a lot* about money, and I became very good at budgeting. Considering the recent news about the president wanting to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, I'm thinking even *more* about money now.

I was recently at a conference where Eric Ting, the artistic director of California Shakespeare Theater said: “No conversation about equity should happen without a conversation about compensation. Compensation is one of the largest barriers. If we want to create a more diverse theatre, it’s not about the opportunities and offering them—that’s only 25 percent of the journey.” He’s right. Money is such an essential ingredient in the diversity conversation. When you have more money, more resources are accessible to you, you can take more risks with your life. When you don’t have money, certain life choices become unavailable to you.

I can see this in my own family. I am the youngest of four girls. My oldest sister came to America when she was a teenager. Because our parents were new immigrants who worked 12 hours a day on minimum wage, she had to look after her three younger siblings, and two of us were under the age of 18. When I saw her recently on my trip home to California, she told me, “If I left to go to school far away, who would take care of you, make sure you were fed?” And I remember when I needed to go to the dentist or to get a checkup, she always took me. People thought she was my mother. As I talked to her in February, I could hear the longing in her voice, the resentment that bubbles up when she talks about us leaving home to go to college, to be free. And I thought, the only difference between me and her was that I was lucky enough to have been born last. If our roles were reversed, our lives would be entirely different. And it is not because I am more capable, smarter, or more resilient. She is all of those things. In fact, she has more courage than I do. When she was 14, living in Vietnam, my parents placed her in an illegal fishing boat and hoped she would make it to a foreign coastline.

No amount of boot strapping, savings, can change this fact: when you are poor, when you are carrying the livelihood of your family on your shoulders, there is a whole world out there that is inaccessible to you. Your only goal is to lift yourself and your family away from poverty.

So how can you ask that poor kid to be an artist? In fact, when I told my sister that I wanted to be a journalist, she scoffed and said, “You’re going to be poor. Be an accountant, that’s a more stable job.” She’s an accountant. Also, she wasn’t wrong. But unlike her, I had a choice. I could choose to be a journalist. I could choose to be poor. I could choose to move to Syracuse, enroll in graduate school, and come out making \$30,000 a year with \$92,000 in student loan debt. And if I had failed, my parents owned a house then. My sisters and their grown-up, six-figure salary jobs could lend me money. I had a safety net.

But what if you don’t have that safety net and you want to enter the arts? What if you want to be an artist, but if things got rough there would be no one to pay your rent, or buy you dinner, or place you on their health insurance?

Recently, I edited [a series of stories](#) for *American Theatre*’s February issue about artists’ compensation because I wanted to find an answer to those questions. It is a truism that you can’t make a living in the theatre. Yet there are people who do, even when they come from poor families. I wanted to see, down to the budget sheet, how they did it.

Here is one answer I received. In 2012, actor Nick Westrate won a Drama Desk Award, worked 52 hours a week Off-Broadway, and filed for bankruptcy. He came from a working-class family with a farm in Michigan. And until late last year, 63 percent of Off-Broadway actors were making \$593 a week. And once you take out agent fees and union dues, most actors in New

York City were taking home less than minimum wage. So Nick placed his expenses on credit cards and, as he put it, “rolled the dice.” That’s one way artists make it work.

Another way: donate your eggs. In fact, two different women told me that was a strategy for them. One of them was a playwright named [Leah Nanako Winkler](#). She grew up poor in Lexington, Kentucky and she had to sell her eggs in order to have enough money to buy a plane ticket to New York City. And though her plays have been produced around the country, she recently had to drop out of her MFA program because her scholarship was not renewed.

Here’s a quote from playwright Jose Rivera that sums up this problem: “In the early ‘80s, I lived in Park Slope in a seven-room apartment, and my share of the rent was about \$340. So I could work a survival job or a part-time job, still pay my rent, and still do my art. I think that’s just gone. Artists are squeezed out of Manhattan—young people, I think—and that’s the biggest difference. The prospects for survival are almost impossible unless you come from money. Unless you have a trust fund—an inheritance. You have something to back you up. Without that, I don’t know how people do it.”

And people of color are less likely to come from family that can give them trust funds. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), as of 2014 there is a huge income gap between white and black Americans, with the median household income for white families being \$71,300 compared to \$43,300 for black and Latino families. Asians are an anomaly among groups of color. The median Asian household income is the highest of all racial groups, with \$77,900.

But the wage gap between black and white Americans persists into higher education. White Americans holding bachelor’s degrees have a median household income of \$106,600 versus \$82,300 for black individuals with a degree. And people of color are more likely to live in

poverty, with 26 percent of the black population living in poverty, 24 percent Latinos, 12 percent Asians, and 10 percent whites.

Universities further feed this inequity. Three years ago, I wrote a story about [student loan debt](#) among workers in the theatre. As part of that story, I wanted to see how big the problem was. After all, if the total student loan debt in 2014 was \$1.2 trillion, then how much of that came from theatre students? I tried to find the answer in the most scientific of ways: I released a SurveyMonkey poll.

Here are the highlights of the poll. Out of 500 respondents, 27 percent had \$16,000 – \$30,000 in debt, 22 percent had \$31,000 – \$50,000 in debt, 16 percent had \$51,000 – \$80,000 in debt, 13 percent had \$81,000 – \$100,000 in debt. At the same time, 67 percent reported their income from theatre work ranged from nothing to \$24,000. 41 percent said they think they will be able to pay off their debt, while 27 percent did not believe they can pay it off. Then again, when the average actor in New York City makes less than minimum wage, how are they supposed to pay off \$30,000 in loans?

Now, many may think, theatre may not be rich in finances, but it is rich in passionate people. But what kind of people? I asked. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents were white, and 68 percent female. So when that student of color or poor student graduates into this field, this is what they are facing:

1. Full-time internships and assistantships that are usually unpaid or pay a tiny stipend, which will then require them to have a part-time job on top of the full-time internship.
2. A field where the roles onstage and off are dominated by white men. For example, for [actors of color](#), female actors, or actors with disability, there are substantially fewer opportunities for them to make a full-time living in the theatre because there just aren't enough roles for them and they are less likely to be cast in roles that are not defined by race, gender, or disability.

3. If you are a playwright of color, you will be produced less. According to playwright [Gwydion Suilebhan](#), who headed up a demographic study in Washington, D.C. theatre, in 2016-17, out of 159 productions at 36 theatres, 16 percent were by playwrights of color. It was consistent with previous years.
4. If you are a female playwright, you will also be produced less. According to [American Theatre magazine](#), in the 2016-17 season, only 26 percent of work produced around the country are created by women.

So because the theatre field is still so inequitable, artists who aren't white and male have a harder time finding work, which means they have a harder time making a living. In the face of those overwhelming odds, when your funds are running dangerously low, who would want to continue gambling on theatre?

The amount it costs to get a degree, coupled with the low return, means that the only people who can afford to take that gamble are those whose family is wealthy, or those who love it in an overwhelming—bordering on impractical—fashion. According to the [U.S. Census](#), by 2020, 50.2 percent of children under 18 will be people of color (also known as non-Hispanic white). By 2044, 50.3 percent of all Americans will be people of color. Those are the future theatre audiences. Those are the future theatre artists. If we want to bring that populace into the theatre, yes, we need to go into the classrooms and educate them about the beauty of the performing arts. But at the same time, we need to make the road into the theatre easier for them to walk down. We need to talk about money. As actor Nick Westrate told me:

Fair wages allow all types of different people to engage in the creation of art. Unfair wages lead to the deterioration of the participation of minority communities in the creation of art and working-class communities in the creation of art. Disproportionately black and brown artists, minority artists, come from working-class backgrounds; if those people are not supported financially, they can't make the work. And those are the people whose perspectives we need the most right now.

Part 3: Show Me the Money

But there is hope! I am not going to leave you with the problems, without some solutions. In fact, some institutions around the country have started addressing this problem. Some institutions are starting at the educational level. Take, for instance, the Yale School of Drama. One of their focuses is on affordability. Ninety-two percent of their students receive financial aid. And a student with high financial need will receive an aid package that covers 82 percent of the total cost of attendance over three years. Students can graduate with as little as \$9,000 in loans.

Yale doesn't track the demographics of its student body, so they don't know if there's a correlation between a more diverse student body and financial aid. But I reached out to the dean of Yale's School of Drama, James Bundy, and this is what he told me: "Anecdotally, we see and accept applicants each year who only applied to Yale, and who tell us financial aid was a key driver of that decision." And this is not just a possibility among Ivy League colleges. I was speaking to a friend of mine who is a director in Seattle. She requested that I keep her statements anonymous, but she told me that when the university she teaches at wanted to diversify their student body, they focused on tuition:

If the goal was to have half the student body be people of color, very few can actually afford the tuition to go there, so they actually spend a lot of money on scholarships. So they did invest more money into scholarships and they achieved that goal of having the student body be 50 percent student of color.

Pretty cool, isn't it? And here is another thing she told me: "I had a couple of students, if the scholarship didn't happen, they would have to leave school."

And just last week, Roundabout Theatre Company in New York announced that it was launching the [Theatrical Workforce Development Program](#), and it will train students for three years and place them into technical theatre jobs and internships. Here's the kicker: the program

is free and the students will be given a living wage the first year of training and will be placed in an entry-level job during their second year. Most of the students in it now are from low-income families. Greater society is continually telling artists that their work has no value, that they should expect to starve, that they should feel lucky to be paid at all. And theatre, by not paying its workers a living wage, reinforces this mindset.

But what if more focus was placed on scholarships and grants for low-income students? What if we truly turned theatre into a trade—something that has value—and placed students into jobs and paid internships when they graduated? What if universities funded those internships and even made sure that their graduates are making a living wage? It would mean, from the beginning, theatre students are taught that their work has value, that they should be paid for their efforts, that artists are an essential part of society. They are taught that theatre can be a career, instead of just a hobby.

More theatres around the country have made a living wage part of their mission. For example, Ars Nova—a 99-seat theatre in New York City—recently announced what it called a [Fair Pay Initiative](#). Its administrative jobs now start at \$47,000 annually, and their artists are being paid above contract minimums. Want to know how they found the money to do so? Simple: they fundraised for it and made it clear that art is nothing without the people who make it, and those people should be paid fairly. Instead of a capital campaign for a building, they launched a *human* capital campaign.

I have spoken to administrators from around the country who have successfully fundraised for higher wages, and they all told me the same thing: when you tell donors how little artists are making and how many hours they're putting into the work, not surprisingly, the

checkbooks come out. Donors, audiences—they want the people making the art to be paid fairly. If you don't believe me, just listen to James Bundy:

I assume that it is not the intent of theatre leaders to exclude or financially cripple people on the basis of class or race, but it is clear that this is what is happening, and it is incumbent on those of us who believe the field should be more inclusive to put our money where our mouths are.

Wages have started to go up. Recently, Actors' Equity, with the help of an actors' advocacy group called [Fair Wage Onstage](#), negotiated an average pay increase of 49 percent Off-Broadway.

But that's only for one group of artists. The problem will only get worse. Living costs are going up every year, which means human costs are only going to go up, too. Theatres and universities need to get ahead of this problem.

Conclusion

I know that we are living in an uncertain time where the arts and public education are under attack. I don't want anyone here to interpret the criticisms of this speech as criticism of the arts and to think that means that the arts should be given less money—that the National Endowment for the Arts does not matter. That's not true. The arts need more money! We all need more money. Because right now, the arts matter more than ever. By offering different perspectives, different stories on the stage, theatre forces different people from all walks of life to interact with each other, to listen to each other. You can't dehumanize a group of people if you're seeing their stories in front of you. You cannot be afraid of immigrants or trans people or Muslims if their bodies are in the room with you. Through this democratic community that we build, we are forced to acknowledge each other's humanity. That is why right now, in our

divided and fearful America, the arts—theatre—are needed more than ever. We need more of what theatre is already doing so wonderfully. We need more free theatre performances, we need more subsidized tickets, we need more arts education, and we need more diverse work that speaks to the time we're living in. And, just as importantly, we need more jobs that pay a living wage.

I know that for many, theatre is still considered an elitist art form, including by those who want to eliminate the NEA. In the world we live in today, where we are wondering how we can connect to poor Americans—marginalized Americans—and justify the existence of theatre, the thing to not do right now is to continue propagating the inequalities within theatre, to say that only the wealthy can make theatre, that only the wealthy are invited in.

Depending on free work, on low wages—that only reinforces that notion. Do you want theatre to matter to the poor, the disenfranchised? Give them a scholarship, pay them a living wage, make it possible for them to participate. If we don't want theatre to become an elitist art form, we need to make sure that everyone can afford to be a theatre artist. We need to open the doors and let more people in.