



## Tips for Inclusive Casting

Advancing Arts Forward, run by Viviana Vargas, is a movement to advance equity, inclusion and social justice through the arts.

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By [Advancing Arts Forward](#)

While working in the Diversity & Inclusion office at Actors' Equity Association, I had the pleasure of hearing from various stakeholders in the process of casting a show. When I say "inclusive casting," I'm talking about casting actors of color, actors with disabilities, women, trans and gender non-conforming actors, and other members of historically and currently marginalized communities that are not well represented or misrepresented onstage in theatre productions. Here are some tips for inclusive casting from the earliest start of the producing process until after the show ends:

### At the start of the process:

1. Start with the stories. As a producer or presenter, it starts with the stories you are looking to tell. Think about selecting playwrights who are from marginalized communities and are writing stories of these communities and lived experiences. As a playwright, you can also include a clause in your contracts → if not cast by an actor of a specific identity or identities, pull the play. Playwrights can also include a note in casting breakdowns for plays that

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2. Budget for “extra” time and resources. When working towards inclusive casting, you might have to allot more time and resources (financial and human) than that which you normally do to be able to find the right actors. You need to find them and gain their trust. After years of being ignored (whether by you or the larger societal norms), expect an actor of a specific identity you are looking for to first off find you and secondly trust you enough to audition. So, you need to put in the extra work. You may want to use avenues you’ve never tried before such as going to networks and outreach organizations. Putting up a single casting notice is not enough. Also, when casting for a culturally or identity specific role do not stop looking until you have found them. Finally, your hiring team, acknowledge your own diversity or lack thereof within the decision making team and make sure you are sitting in on an audition. Make your team aware of where conscious and unconscious bias could

occur when thinking about race, gender/gender identity, race/ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, national origin, ancestry, and disability. These are the legally protected areas. However, you should also consider other factors like education, socio-economic status, marital status, if someone is a parent or not, and many other things. Another tip here is to bring on a dramaturg or consultant early on to support this step. For Deaf actors, for example, it makes a big difference to have a Director of Artistic Sign Language (DASL) on the other side of the table during that audition.

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4. Have inclusive conversations early. Before calling in actors, decide if there actually needs to be restrictions on any roles. You can ask yourself and your team, “Can this role be played by a woman, someone who is trans or gender non-conforming, someone with a disability, a person of color, an older person, etc.” Another way to phrase the question is, “Are we open to the idea of a woman, person of color, disabled actor, etc. playing this role,” and, for example, “Does this character have to be played by a nondisabled, white and cisgendered male, and if yes, why?” Only pin down what is integral for the storytelling by the playwright and if a play does not have an element of race, gender/gender identity, age, disability, etc. specific for the storytelling, bring everybody in. Be open to seeing underrepresented communities play a character that was not necessarily “written for them” or a role that was not previously cast with an actor from their community. For example, a Deaf actor doesn’t only have to play Deaf characters, but hearing characters too; a transgender actor doesn’t only have to play trans characters, but cisgender characters too; etc. However, do make sure to never take opportunities away from underrepresented communities in established roles. For example, don’t cast a hearing actor to play a Deaf character. Always try to have these conversations early on so it is not a surprise in the audition room for anyone. For example, when bringing in an actor who is female for a role you may have unconsciously assumed would be cast as male, the moment of processing this shift may take away from watching the actor’s performance. As a playwright, consider your own bias when writing characters and be open to going through this exercise in your process.

## In the casting breakdown:

1. After having the inclusive conversations early, when casting for a role that could be played by an actor of any race/ethnicity, disability, age, or gender/gender identity, make it clear in your casting notice that you want to see actors of all these backgrounds. List them out specifically so that individuals can be sure you are talking about them. For example, when you’re casting roles that are not gender-specific, list something like, “all genders” or “any gender identity” instead of “male” or “female.” If there is a specific gender you are looking for, you could say “male-identifying,” or “female-identifying,” or “gender non-conforming,” for instance.
2. In your casting notice, offer contact information to schedule auditions and a way to contact about any accessibility accommodations, for example an ASL interpreter, wheelchair accessibility, or any other accessibility accommodations.
3. Keep the breakdown about the character and not about the actor. For example, if casting Hamlet, talk about the character Hamlet is instead of the actor you are looking for. This keeps it about the job that is playing the character. E.g. Hamlet (male-identifying, 30 years old, any race/ethnicity, nondisabled or disabled).

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1. See your options. Make sure to audition actors representing all identities and backgrounds to really be able to see on bias. Do you need someone with BFA or MFA university training on their resume? Identify what to achieve your artistic goals. Sometimes having an MFA, having attended elite universities, certain institutions, union status, and number of past credits are barriers in a playing field that is for actors of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, disabilities, and beyond. Think about what you really need in each role. Do you need someone who has an private institution or do you need someone who can tell the story, be creative, take direction, and

3. Support the community. Find ways to support the community that you are representing in your artistic work. Be in conversation early and often. For example, this could mean connecting with local advocacy groups, churches, movement to advance equity, inclusion and social justice through the arts.

## In scheduling auditions:

1. Send sides in advance. Your process of sending sides could be one of the simplest shifts that allow for more inclusive casting. Remember to send sides in advance, at least two days, to everyone. This can make the difference for actors with dyslexia for example, but there are so many other actors who benefit from this best practice. You don't need an actor who can memorize lines in a few hours, so why audition for this kind of skill?
2. Ask about additional accommodations around sides. Ask if actors need any other accommodations when it comes to sides. For example, an actor who has low vision might need their sides and any other written materials sent to them in advance so they can reprint them into large print. You can also create large print versions of sides yourself to have on hand for actors with low vision, but it is always best to ask what folks need. Some actors may have a great method that works for them. If you are sending a PDF or non-editable form of sides, you can also ask if an actor needs it in an editable form i.e. word document so that they can make accommodations for themselves.
3. Scheduling ASL Interpreters. One option for scheduling ASL Interpreters is to schedule a period to see Deaf actors with an ASL interpreter present that you hire. In selecting an ASL interpreter, first ask if the actor would prefer to bring their own interpreter. Hiring an ASL interpreter can financially be compared to hiring a piano accompanist in a musical theater audition. The ASL interpreter voices for the actor and alike how some actors prefer to use their own accompanist, some actors prefer to use their own interpreters. In selecting an ASL interpreter yourself, make sure they are certified/licensed and choose someone you know will do well in a theatrical setting. Some ASL interpreters may lack a theatrical awareness when voicing for a Deaf actor. Schedule to have as many Deaf actors come in during the time the interpreter is hired for the audition period.
4. Translation & translators. Do not engage in a practice of having actors translate sides for you in any given foreign language. That is, unless you are paying them as a translator. Have sides in the language you are asking actors to speak in and if you need actors to translate, pay them.
5. Remove financial barriers where you can. Go paperless with your headshots and resumes! Not only does this save some trees and the environment, but it also removes the financial barrier for actors without the means to purchase piles of headshots and resume prints.
6. How-to: pronouns. Get into the practice of not assuming someone else's pronouns, the words which you use to describe someone when they aren't around like she/he/they/xe. Ask in advance about an actor's pronouns or lack thereof (some people might just prefer you to use their name) and add their pronouns on your schedule next to their name. This will also help your creative team get used to talking about the person using the correct pronouns. Do your best to be respectful and use the name and pronouns requested. If you accidentally use the wrong



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### In the audition room:

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...sive tone. At a meeting where not everyone knows each other, ask folks behind the table to  
 ...lves with their name and the pronouns they use—for example, “Hi, I’m Viviana and I use  
 ...uns.” This sends the message that you are not making assumptions about anyone’s gender and  
 ...ns, and that people are free to self-identify. If you are the leader, start with yourself. Also, in a  
 ...ctice using gender neutral language, for example, the “person in the blue shirt,” instead of the  
 ...nt.” Similarly, “Sir” and “Madam” and “Mr.” and “Ms.” are best avoided.

2. Using ASL Interpreters. During the audition, make eye contact with the actor not the interpreter. Do not say, “Tell  
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 ...ing/ner them... Have the interpreter stand behind the casting table so the creative team can focus on the actor. It  
 ...movement to advance equity, inclusion and social  
 ...is also important to understand Deaf culture, which describes the social beliefs, behaviors, art, literary traditions,  
 justice through the arts, and shared institutions of communities that are affected by deafness and which use sign languages  
 as the main means of communication. Uppercase “D” Deaf refers to a person who is culturally Deaf and a member  
 of the Deaf community using American Sign Language (ASL). Lowercase “d” deaf refers to a person who has a  
 hearing loss. Only people who self-identify as belonging to Deaf culture are appropriately referred to as Deaf (using  
 the capital D).

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3. Breaks. Be sure to allow for breaks, as standard, for everyone, but also in particular to better accommodate those who have mobility disabilities such as multiple sclerosis. Actors with disabilities can do the job, but the standard industry breaks are important. Plus everyone is better off that way!
4. Building and bathroom wheelchair accessibility. Make sure your audition room, building, and bathrooms are wheelchair accessible especially when you know an actor with a mobility disability will be attending. e.g. an actor who is a wheelchair user or an actor who cannot walk up many flights of stairs.
5. Have gender neutral bathrooms. If possible, have gender neutral bathrooms. If bathrooms in the meeting space are not already gender neutral, ask if it’s possible to put gender neutral signs so that everyone can feel more welcome. In the future, look for and support spaces that have gender neutral bathrooms already installed.
6. Ask if someone needs an accommodation. Do not assume someone with a disability cannot perform the job. Legally, employers cannot ask potential employees whether they have a disability or inquire about the nature or severity of the disability. You may describe the specific requirements of the role and ask whether the actor can fulfill these requirements with or without reasonable accommodations. As an employer, you can also ask an actor to describe or demonstrate how they might perform the duties of the job, with or without accommodation. [The laws on hiring for people with disabilities.](#)

## In the decision making room:

1. Don’t settle. Don’t settle for less than authentic casting.
2. Consider who is in the room. Consider your own diversity before going into the casting room and towards the end of the casting process when making final decisions. Who is making the decision?
3. Advocate against blackface. Do not continue “brownface, yellowface, redface, or blackface” or the overall casting of white actors to play characters of color. Similarly, don’t settle for the casting of nondisabled actors to play characters who are disabled. Disability is not a “skill.”  
 “While theatre has always been a place for transformation, we must also acknowledge the past oppressions and ongoing inequities facing people of color, including an uneven playing field where the vast majority of opportunities, onstage and off, are held by whites. In addition, appropriating the identities of communities of color has historically reinforced racial stereotypes and subjugation.” — Theatre Communications Group

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3 networks or organizations you asked support from in the beginning process  
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may or may not have tried or want to try depending on your power in the casting process. A big thing we are aware of is that even casting directors do not have the power in some cases to ensure inclusive casting stops where the money starts. When it comes to commercial theatre and even many casting directors are strongly (mis)influenced by what they think longtime donors/funders/ticket buyers would want. People of color, people with disabilities, trans and gender conforming people, women, and beyond. Inclusive casting attracts more new patrons. For example, when casting Deaf actors in Deaf roles, you'll actually attract the Deaf community to attend, perhaps even for the first time!

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- [MIT's Action Tips for Allies of Trans People](#)
  - [LCIS Working with An Interpreter: Do's and Don'ts](#)
  - [American Theatre Magazine's Standing Up For Playwrights and Against Colorblind Casting](#)
  - [Project Am I Right](#)
  - [Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts](#)
  - [2017 TCG National Conference: Full Circle](#)
  - [Guidelines and Best Practices for Ethical Casting](#) by Annalisa Dias, Amelia Acosta Powell, and Eric Swartz

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Any other tips for inclusive casting? Email us at [submit@theatreartlife.com](mailto:submit@theatreartlife.com)

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