ACT FOR ACTION REPORT

The Reality of Black British Theatre Professionals

Prepared For:
Black British
Theatre Awards

Irvine Partners
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Black British Theatre Awards

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Introduction

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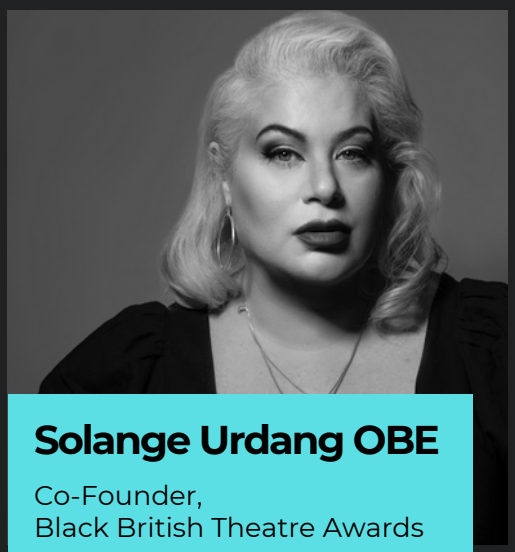


Solange Urdang OBE

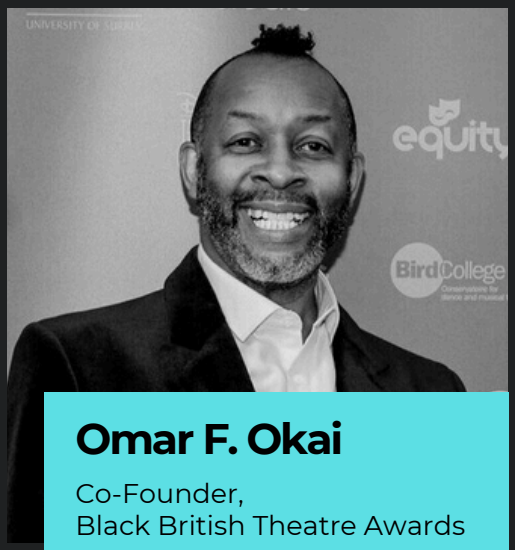
Co-Founder,
Black British Theatre Awards

Welcome to the Act for Action Report, a comprehensive investigation into the challenges and inequalities faced by Black professionals within the British theatre industry. This report stems from a dedicated effort to amplify voices that have historically been marginalised and underrepresented.

By engaging directly with Black theatre professionals, we aim to illuminate the realities they face both on stage and behind the scenes, offering insights that are not only provocative but also pivotal in shaping the future.

This research seeks to provide a detailed view of the current landscape within British theatre, contrasting the presence of Black and White individuals both presently and over the past five years. This data will help contextualise our findings and underscore the urgency for systemic change.

Methodologically, we have collaborated closely with Solange Urdang's network of Black theatre professionals, distributing an email questionnaire which resulted in responses from a total of 291 individuals. This enabled us to construct a nuanced narrative informed directly by those working professionally within the industry.



Omar F. Okai

Co-Founder,
Black British Theatre Awards

Public data additionally supplemented our investigation, enriching our analysis with broader industry trends. Through this dual approach, we aspire to provoke meaningful dialogue, mobilise community support, and ultimately drive substantive change towards a more inclusive and equitable environment for all theatre professionals.

Through the Act for Action Report, we are harnessing the power of data and collective voices to pave the way for a more diverse and representative future in the British theatre industry.

Methodology

Methodology

The Act for Action Report gathered and analysed data on the experiences of Black professionals within the British theatre industry. This was done through survey collation and public data. Our approach was designed to elicit comprehensive insights while ensuring the voices of those directly affected were prominently featured.

Survey
We distributed a structured questionnaire via email to contacts within Solange Urdang's network of Black theatre professionals. The questionnaire was hosted on SurveyMonkey and aimed to gather qualitative and quantitative data on various aspects of their experiences and challenges in the industry. Over the course of our data collection period, from 1 to 15 July 2024, we received a total of 291 completed responses. This provided a substantial dataset for our analysis, reflecting a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the community.

Questionnaire design
The questionnaire explored key themes such as representation, opportunities, barriers to entry, workplace culture, and perceptions of inclusivity. It was limited to 15 questions to encourage engagement and limit question fatigue. It concluded by inviting respondents to express their willingness to participate in media interviews, should the opportunity arise.

Data analysis
Responses were analysed using both quantitative methods, such as statistical summaries and trend analysis, and qualitative methods, including thematic coding and narrative analysis. This dual approach allowed us to derive meaningful insights into the experiences of Black theatre professionals, as well as identify potential areas for change.

In addition to primary survey responses, public data and industry reports were consulted to provide context and comparative insights. This supplementary information contextualised our findings within broader industry trends and historical data, enhancing the depth and relevance of our analysis.

Limitations
While efforts were made to maximise participation and diversity of responses, our study acknowledges inherent limitations, including potential self-selection bias among respondents and the specific focus on Black theatre professionals within a British context. It also includes a limited number of respondents from those that do not racially categorise themselves as Black and therefore perspectives from allies are also included in this report.

The Act for Action Report aims to contribute to ongoing discussions around equity and representation within the British theatre industry, advocating for systemic change and fostering a more inclusive environment for all professionals.

Support for young people entering the industry

Support for young people entering the industry

The Act for Action Report highlights profound challenges and systemic barriers faced by young Black individuals aspiring to enter the British theatre industry. Our findings highlight a need for support initiatives to fight against these barriers and foster opportunities for all aspiring professionals.

60.1%

felt unsupported in entering the industry **on stage**

79%

Felt unsupported in entering the industry **off stage**

Moreover, a mere 9% of respondents were aware of available funding specifically aimed at supporting Black individuals entering the industry, indicating a critical awareness gap in financial resources. The majority of respondents (70%+) expressed frustration over the lack of financial and structural support as it is considered a necessary component for advancing their careers.

"Arts funding has been slashed."

Survey participant

Over 70%

of young Black respondents cited significant obstacles hindering their entry into the theatre industry. Many described the industry as inaccessible due to historical disadvantages, limited opportunities, and gatekeeping practices that restrict entry.

Support for young people entering the industry

Racial bias and institutional structures:

- Many respondents (72.3% on stage, 71.4% off stage) pointed to racial bias within the industry, noting that theatres are predominantly run by White counterparts. This imbalance often results in exclusionary practices and limits opportunities for Black professionals.

Lack of representation and misunderstanding:

- Over 70% were concerned with the lack of representation and understanding of diverse experiences within theatre narratives. Respondents emphasised the industry's tendency to base roles on a narrow, stereotypical portrayal of Black characters, rather than authentic and multifaceted representations.

Critically, respondents noted that diversity initiatives often fall short of meaningful change, with over 70% observing that diversity quotas and policies are more symbolic than substantive in practice.

“As a young creative who was appointed to a position of joint senior leadership within a company that (to my knowledge) had never hired Black people or even undergone anti-racism training, I struggled with the battle of not wanting to have to prove myself and trying to diverge from the company’s traditional working practices... I was left to pick up the pieces of a company with team members and a Board that did not take my appointment seriously.”

Survey participant

Opportunities for Black theatre pros

Opportunities for Black theatre pros

The Act for Action Report has seen inequality in opportunities for Black professionals within the British theatre industry as a result of systemic barriers that hinder career advancement and equality.

74.6%

of respondents highlighted unequal opportunities for Black professionals on stage, with an equally concerning 75.2% reporting disparities off stage. These findings validate a pervasive imbalance in access to roles, projects, and leadership positions within the industry, perpetuating exclusion and limiting professional growth. A significant number of respondents expressed frustration over the lack of equal opportunities for career progression within the theatre industry. Many reference systemic barriers such as limited mentorship, biased promotion practices, and inadequate support for skill development as key challenges.

More than half

(53.3%) of Black theatre professionals indicated they have experienced discrimination in job applications based on their skin colour. This discriminatory practice reinforces systemic biases that present themselves as challenges to career opportunities and professional development. Furthermore, it validates a continuous imbalance in the industry. These challenges are compounded by intersecting factors of race, status, and gender.

“I’m often the token Black in a show. Playing the funny sidekick or the help. I also have felt that I’ve only got a job because I’m Black which isn’t a great feeling either. You want to be booked for your talent alone.”

Survey participant

Finance & work prospects

Finance & work prospects

The Act for Action Report sheds light on the financial challenges and precarious work prospects faced by Black professionals within the British theatre industry. The findings reflect significant disparities that impact livelihoods and long-term financial security.

40%

of respondents reported not having consistent work within the industry, highlighting the instability and unpredictability of employment opportunities for Black theatre professionals.

An overwhelming number of respondents indicated that theatre does not provide them with sufficient income to live comfortably. Therefore, there is a need for them to have additional jobs to sustain themselves - 78.1% have taken on secondary jobs. This reliance on multiple sources of income shows the financial strain faced by Black professionals in the theatre sector and verifies the income insecurity challenge. Furthermore, 73.3% are worried about retirement, highlighting anxieties about long-term financial planning and security within the context of a financially volatile industry.

“As a theatre maker, it often feels like there isn't much room for career progression and links to investment opportunities to further my work, despite having had significant success with previous projects.”

Survey participant

Mental health of Black theatre pros

Mental health of Black theatre pros

The Act for Action Report highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by Black professionals in the British theatre industry. The report reveals that systemic issues and unique experiences within this professional environment have a detrimental impact on their well-being.

50%

reported being affected mentally by their experiences in the theatre industry. These impacts are often a result of factors such as job insecurity, discrimination, and a lack of equitable opportunities.

Experiences of tokenism

A recurring theme among respondents was the feeling of being tokenised within the industry. Many expressed frustration over being seen as the "token Black" individual in productions or professional settings, which contributes to feelings of isolation and undermines their professional contributions. This further highlights the lack of representation and diversity, which not only has an impact on career advancement, but mental health too.

“I was in a West End musical as a child and did my own hair for the show every night because the hair department didn't know how to style it... Bear in mind this is a West End production and I was 10! I've worked on TV and commercial productions where I have been the only person without foundation because they don't have my colour, where my Mum has spent hours styling my hair for people because she knew they wouldn't know how.”

Survey participant

Conclusion

Conclusion

The Act for Action Report provides an examination of the challenges faced by Black professionals within the British theatre industry. The report has revealed systemic inequities that impact their professional, financial, and mental well-being, with significant percentages of respondents expressing frustration over racial bias in hiring practices, tokenism, and insufficient support for career advancement. The repercussions range from barriers to entry and limited career opportunities to financial insecurity and mental health strain. Furthermore, these challenges are compounded by a lack of accessible funding, limited career progression opportunities, and deep-seated concerns about long-term financial security and retirement planning.

The findings highlight an increasing need for systemic change and proactive interventions to combat systemic barriers that not only hinder individual progress but also perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and underrepresentation within the industry.

Addressing these challenges requires efforts and collaboration from all stakeholders within the theatre community, including industry leaders, policymakers, educators, and critics. Concrete steps must be taken to:

- **Promote equity and inclusion**
- **Enhance support systems and knowledge around them**
- **Amplify diverse voices and provide accurate representation**
- **Bring about structural change**

The Act for Action Report serves as an encouragement for change. It indicates an urgent need for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive environment for Black theatre professionals. It is a call to address these challenges head on and foster a culture of respect, opportunity, and innovation.

“Thank God for Black British Theatre Awards giving us a platform to excel.”

“I remember being put in an audition for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and the choreographer said to me why are you here?”

Survey participant

Appendix

Additional sources

Findings from public data and industry reports looking at the UK theatre industry over the past two years that have been utilised in this report are as follows:

- Globally, countries have experienced challenges in a variety of industries, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic — a notable moment for many. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted cultural industries, leading to financial hardship and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in the United Kingdom. An academic article published in 2024 by Shaughnessy, Perkins, Spiro, Waddell, and Williamon revealed financial infrastructures, artistic communities and professional landscapes as key primary concerns for creatives in the industry over the past few years.
- Financial support has been reported by the University of Bristol as a challenge, not only for creatives but for government and stakeholders as well. Financial support provided by governments and charities that prioritised individual arts buildings and 'flagship' organisations did not 'trickle down' to help the sector's substantial freelance creative workforce and grassroots programmes and therefore can lead to misunderstandings, as well as lack of knowledge around these offerings.
- The ICT Theatre has reported a 4.7% increase in the number of theatre performances in England's capital in 2022 compared to 2019 (pre-COVID). This indicates a significant recovery from the £49 million recorded earned income during the pandemic years to £303 million for the 2022/2023.
- In 2024, the All In scheme was developed to introduce UK-wide accessibility standards. This includes offering staff training and resources; launching a digital system that allows those with access requirements to share their profile with the organisation. This aims to introduce new audiences to creative and cultural events by streamlining the booking process. This is a result of a historical need for accessibility in the industry. Despite this scheme's focal point being neuro-diverse, deaf and disabled people, it still indicates the need for accessibility and inclusion in the industry and how broad it is. As stated by one of our respondents, accessibility is a challenge that is faced by marginalised groups such as Black people in the UK theatre industry. It shows how unaccommodated these professionals are and how it leads to the challenges that will be further highlighted in the Act for Action Report.

About the Black British Theatre Awards

The Black British Theatre Awards is the only event celebrating the outstanding achievements and contributions of Black professionals in the British theatre industry.

Founded by Solange Urdang and Omar F. Okai in 2019, the BBTAs aim to honour the exceptional work of Black professionals across all aspects of the industry from performers, directors, writers, and producers to sound, music, lighting and design talent.

“It is crucial for us to be loud in our celebration of black talent in the British theatre industry as it not only amplifies the diverse voices that have made significant contributions to enriching the industry with unique and creative and cultural perspectives, but also to recognise the decades-long impact of black professionals’ artistic legacy in the UK while inspiring future generations of black creatives,” say Solange Urdang OBE and Omar F. Okai, Co-Founders of the BBTAs.

Every year the public is invited to submit their favourite Black British theatre professionals for recognition with winners being announced at a ceremony in London. This year, the BBTA will hold its 6th annual awards at the Lyceum Theatre on Monday 4 November. Disney’s award-winning musical, The Lion King, which celebrates its 25th anniversary in the West End this year, is the headline sponsor of the highly anticipated event.

Previous winners of the BBTAs include Ryan Calais Cameron and Tristan Fynn-Aiduenu for Best Director of For Black Boys Who Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy, which is currently playing at the West End at the Garrick Theatre until 1 June, as well as Michael Fatogun as Best Male Lead in Foxes, and Toyin Ayedun-Alase for both Best Female Lead and Best Supporting Female Actor for her work in The Clinic and Alice in Wonderland.

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