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The Joy-Jackson Initiative

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The Joy-Jackson Initiative’s Racial Equity Assessment Prepares for Its Long Awaited Debut

The Joy-Jackson Initiative is preparing their highly anticipated Assessment, created to build institutional equity in the arts, to be released to the public in its first full rollout which includes an accompanying facilitation program. The Joy-Jackson Assessment, JJI’s central tool, will guide arts organizations through a series of questions to identify organizational and systemic inequities regarding the inclusion of People of Color in their organizations. Activated by this summer’s resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, JJI has taken a fundamentally BIPOC approach, placing Black and Indigenous theater practitioners at the forefront of the conversation, and the center of their Assessment.

“Everybody has something they need to do [in order] to create the theater that we want and the world that we want,” said Bruce A. Lemon Jr. (he/him), artistic director of Watts Village and associate artistic director of Cornerstone Theater Company, during a virtual Town Hall designed for the artistic leaders who had participated in The Joy-Jackson Inaugural Beta Cohort to have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

The Joy-Jackson Assessment and its accompanying facilitation program invite organizations to explore how they can create the safest possible spaces for the People of Color in their communities. These tools are designed to assist organizations in formulating and committing to individualized and long-term solutions to address areas for growth and create the structural integrity required to practice antiracist theatre and restore relationships with theater practitioners in their communities starting with Black and Indigenous folks as well as the wider community of practitioners of color.

"I think it's essential that everything goes into bylaws. Theater is not happening right now. What a perfect moment to put things into your bylaws and your mission and your vision," said Assessment participant Jer Adrienne Lelliott (she/they), Founding Artistic Director of Coeurage Theatre Company when asked how arts organizations can best effect the necessary change. “Every single prompt from The Assessment is an actionable bylaw.”

The Joy-Jackson Assessment boasts a robust set of questions designed to tackle theatre practices rooted in systemic racism that range from, *“Do you employ hair designers and stylists that have*

demonstrated the ability to properly care for textured hair?” to “Is your organization named after a person who participated in racist actions, such as performing in blackface?”

“The Assessment underwent a rigorous peer review process, inviting BIPOC theatre practitioners across multiple disciplines to review and contribute to the questions,” explains The Joy-Jackson Initiative’s founder and executive director, Gabrielle Jackson (she/her). “What’s resulted is an incredibly powerful and thorough learning tool that examines every corner of the theater industry through the lens of antiracism.”

For many, answering The Assessment’s questions is not only hard work, but “heart work.” The deeply personal reflection called for by The Assessment guides arts leaders and the organizations they helm to take the necessary steps toward an industry that protects, uplifts, amplifies, and fully includes BIPOC artists, administrators, and audience members. The kind of work that is vital if we want our industry to continue to thrive in a post-pandemic world.

“A lot of things are uncertain about the future of the entertainment industry,” admits Joy-Jackson’s managing director, Julie Ouellette (she/they), “but one thing we know is that we need real institutional change. Our industry, like our world, has been rocked by the events of this year, and arts organizations cannot continue to abuse and exploit People of Color without repercussions. Our society’s collective values are evolving, and arts organizations must evolve with them.”

The Joy-Jackson Initiative aims to become an industry-wide resource at the forefront of implementing a long-overdue systemic overhaul.

In addition to The Assessment, The Joy-Jackson Initiative provides a range of educational resources and tools for art organizations to reference, including “From Broadway to Blackface,” an interactive timeline tracing Broadway’s links to slavery and antiblackness, a series of virtual Town Halls for the Live Theatre Community discussing actionable steps toward building systemic equity in the arts, and a library and glossary designed to foster understanding of the global antiracism movement and the ways it relates to the theater industry.

Organizations interested in learning more about the Joy-Jackson Initiative, keeping up with The Assessment, or exploring JJI’s additional tools and resources can do so online at www.joyjackson.org.

For more information about The Assessment, please contact Marissa Joyce Stamps at press.joyjackson@gmail.com.

The Joy-Jackson Initiative, founded by singer, actor, writer, and activist Gabrielle Jackson in June 2020, is actively setting a new industry standard for the American Theatre and beyond, creating an industry where BIPOC artists, administrators, and audiences can be truly valued, safe, and uplifted. The volunteer-based Initiative is accepting donations via their [Venmo](#)

@JoyJacksonNow. For updates on The Joy-Jackson Assessment and for more information about the organization, please visit www.JoyJackson.org.