

Shanel LaShay Smith



ASPIRE Reflection

Upon reflection of my week in Washington D.C as a member of the 2019 LORT/KCACTF ASPIRE Leadership Fellows Program I can describe my experience in one word, Transformative. Simply put, the week changed my perspective within the field of theatre and what it has to offer and what I could offer back. As the week progressed, I had a greater sense of self as I began to learn and grow with members of my cohort. The genuine willingness to learn from each other fostered a positive environment that allowed all of us to express ourselves openly and freely. We had open dialogue about privilege and even began to recognize the privileges we unknowingly enjoyed and how they affect our perspectives. We talked about our own personal narratives and how they affect our “why” statements. Each of us within the cohort have varying histories, but collectively we have a strong passion for theatre. All of our pitched theatre companies speak to our individual narratives. The binding characteristic between them all is the goal to serve the communities we come from. For the most part our communities are typically underserved and lacking representation within the arts. Recognizing the power of expression and artistic freedom we are all advocates for the arts hoping to foster change. Participating in this fellowship highlighted that aspect for me and helped sharpened the tools needed to bring about change. A reoccurring theme within the week was “Relationships”. We discussed how to build them, maintain them, and grow them. Every speaker we listened to and every theater we visited mentioned relationships in some shape or form. Maria Manuela Goyanes of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company spoke about the community surrounding her theatre. DC is a diverse city whose current population is predominantly African American, but as of late it has a growing Latinx population. As Artistic Director Maria strives to put up works that people want to see and spark conversations about, but she will not be able to accomplish this if she doesn’t understand the community she serves. One of her initiatives is “Connectivity” between the surrounding communities and to engage them on topics they care about. In order to actively serve her community, Maria keeps her ear to the ground and often attends city forums and other community meetings to better understand her audience in order to curate a season of shows and establish additional content to supplement them. She calls theatre a *Relational Experience*.

Without a connection between the audience and the play on stage the audience has no reason to remain engaged. The idea of relationships relates to everything. The Equity Diversity Initiative within LORT strives to bring diversity to theatre but also maintain and grow theatre's relevancy. To be successful it takes both an understanding of the community's the theatre serves and the issues that affect them, aka building relationships. In one week, I learned so much. I filled notebooks with information and still have barely scratched the surface. I have received advice from some incredible people, gained mentors, and new friends, but most importantly I gained a great understanding of what it takes to be in Arts Management. Being an Artistic Director, a Managing Director, or even leading a theatre's community engagement efforts is an act of service. It is a position of influence that has power to foster change and growth. It is both an exciting and humbling realization that I have the potential to step into such culturally significant roles. I will cherish every lesson I learned and every person I met this week for the remainder of my life.

TCG Reflections by Shanel LaShay Smith

In early May when I asked my region to attend the TCG National Conference as an ASPIRE representative I could not have dreamed for an experience as fruitful and fulfilling as my experience was in Miami. In just one week I had the opportunity to participate in the higher education pre-conference, host a session alongside fellow 2019 ASPIRE cohort members, attend many other sessions, and network with countless professionals. The pre-conference was a highlight because it brought together industry professionals who are dedicated to the growth of the next generation of Theatre Artist. Top schools from around the country were present and engaged in thought provoking conversation. Outside of having the opportunity to pick the brains of these talented individuals myself and the several other students present during the pre-conference were able to speak about our own experiences and openly express our concerns about the industry and things we are currently doing and hope to do to make improvements. This was also an opportunity to learn about policies written and unwritten that effect EDI work in the theatre, fundraising, and career development to name a few. What was evident in the pre-conference was the irritation from industry veterans who grow tired of having the same conversations year after year about the same topics specificity EDI work, work that directly in lines with the ASPIRE Program's missions of disrupting the current pipeline for Art Administrative roles diversifying the field by promoting equitable practices. This lead to the session Isabella, Kyle, and I hosted dedicated to establishing tangible steps that can be quickly implemented (3-5 years) to begin to change the current narrative. The session was very fun to host and very insightful because it brought validity to our concerns because the professionals present acknowledged them, but the session also gave them and us a safe space to acknowledge our concerns and come up with ideas to rectify mistakes that may have been mad. A great moment for me was also the Intergenerational Leaders of Color Meeting. The energy in the room was so amazing and lead to encouraging affirmations and genuine connections. That whole week was phenomenal! The networking at the TCG conference could be its own conference. I loved every minute it of it, and I plan to attend again in the future.