

OPINION: ‘Hamilton’ discrimination allegations raise questions about the real meaning of inclusivity

 tsl.news/opinion-hamilton-discrimination-allegations-raise-questions-about-the-real-meaning-of-inclusivity

October 14, 2021 8:55 pm

Suni Reid, a Black transgender cast member of the national tour for the Broadway musical “Hamilton,” filed a federal civil rights complaint Wednesday, Oct. 13, accusing members of “Hamilton” management and ensemble of multiple counts of harassment and discrimination. The complaint filed includes an itemized list of incidents of harassment Reid endured. These range from homophobic behavior from ensemble members to Reid having their contract terminated for requesting the addition of a gender-neutral dressing room.

There were multiple incidents in which this harassment allegedly escalated to physical violence, as well as several racially motivated comments from the production staff. The alleged incidents are alarming, and are especially shocking considering the show’s commitment to diversifying Broadway through practices like casting actors of color and outreach programs like EduHam.

Reid’s treatment by the cast and management of “Hamilton” is a prime example of a few glaring caveats to the aspiration of diversity in the workplace. First, regulation can only do so much. It is important to note that every complaint filed by Reid has legal precedent in California and New York state law. Workplace regulations in both states necessitate that transgender and gender non-conforming employees have access to facilities that align with their gender presentation. The treatment Reid faced constitutes workplace harassment under both states’ definitions.

Second, diversifying a workplace can only do so much. The management of “Hamilton” succeeded in gathering a diverse cast, but failed to ensure that the workplace was inclusive and safe, and ignored suggestions of how to do so by Reid and others. Creating a diverse space without support for marginalized people puts the most vulnerable members of the group directly in harm’s way. They become subject to egregious incidents of discrimination while the organization receives credit for creating a diverse, equitable space.

Circumstance dictates that those with access to leadership positions are white, male and wealthy. Whether they’re aware of it or not, it creates an environment in which marginalized people feel pressure to keep quiet. Massive systemic power imbalances are condensed into an anxiety that exists on a very interpersonal level. And for the privileged individuals in that dynamic, though those imbalances aren’t their fault, their behavior is their responsibility.

Daniel Belnavis, one of Reid’s fellow ensemble members, wrote that the ensemble of “Hamilton” was a “boys’ club rooted in toxic masculinity and heteronormativity.” The social environment of a workplace exists beyond the scope of regulatory control; it’s something

individual people uphold. When we let small comments slide and attribute issues to structures beyond our control, we aid in the discrimination of those around us.

The presence of these issues in the organization of “Hamilton” is a testament to their prevalence. Diversity is the production’s selling point. And yet, its openly queer members and its Black members are being ruthlessly discriminated against. Cultivating a diverse ensemble was the easy part, and the Broadway community is happy to pat itself on the back for it — gratuitously. There is still the need to create an equitable experience for all employees, and that is where “Hamilton,” like many other organizations and institutions, fell flat.

Reid wasn’t fired for being trans, or for being black, or for speaking out against discrimination — *that* would’ve been illegal. They were fired in the climax of a frustration that had been building within the mostly white management of “Hamilton” and its viciously masculine ensemble for months. People saw Reid as a “squeaky wheel,” something to get rid of before it got management in trouble. Because hadn’t they done enough? They had succeeded at diversity and inclusion, they beat the game. But a room full of Black and brown and queer people working with one another isn’t enough. Even regulated, it isn’t enough.

In pursuit of a truly inclusive workplace, real institutional change has to happen. The makeup of teams and boards and ensembles will change. It will get personal. It has to. Because if it doesn’t, you haven’t created an inclusive workplace. You’ve taken already marginalized people and tucked them soundly into a death trap.

Caelan Reeves CM '24 is a literature and history dual major from Chicago, Illinois. They love everything to do with music, movies and books.