Cybéle Skidmore's makeup design. | Courtesy of Cybéle Skidmore.

THEATRE EDUCATION IN THE CROSSHAIRS:

Teaching Queer and Inclusive Design in an Era of Cultural Erasure

BY BRYAN STANTON

Theatre has long been imagined as a refuge. From high school black boxes to community center stages, the arts have been framed as safe havens for self-expression and identity exploration—particularly for students and educators who don't easily fit the mold. We tell young people that in theatre, they can be themselves. That in a rehearsal room or design lab, their voice matters. That here, finally, they belong.

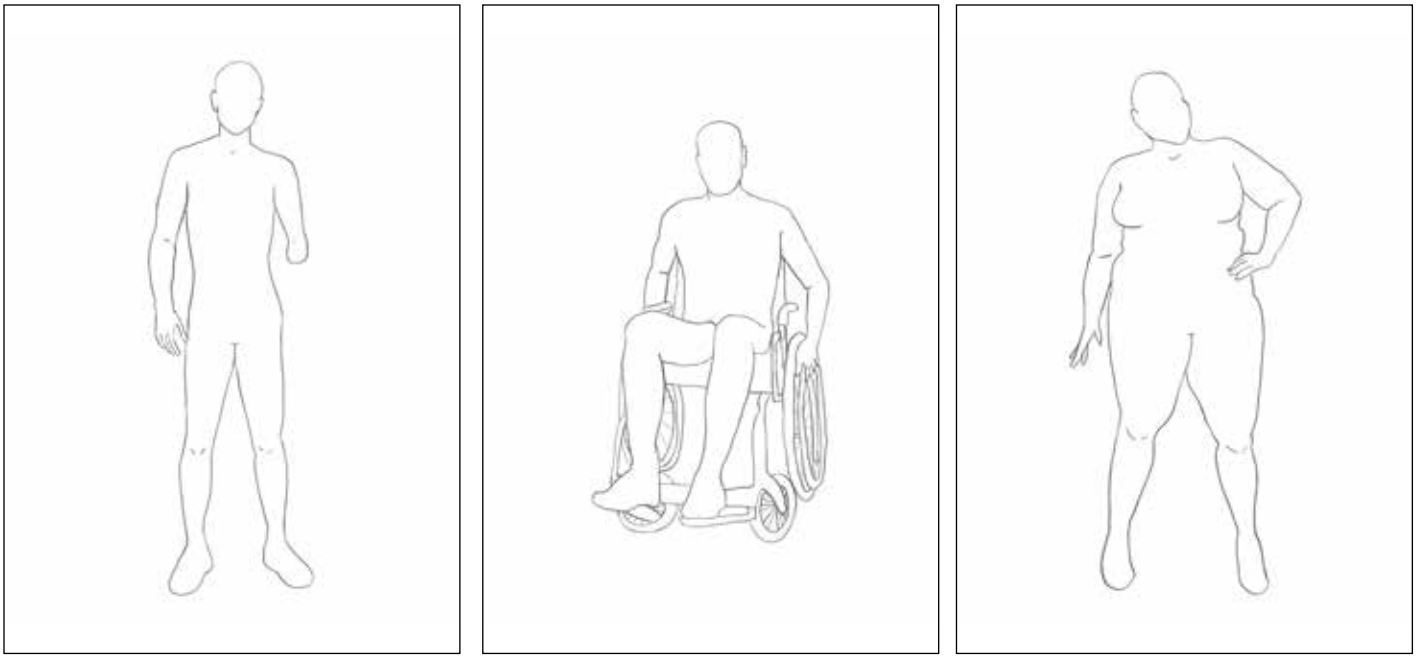
It's a beautiful promise—one that many of us have clung to and tried to recreate for our students. Some of us are successful, and yet, even in theatre, that promise is often unevenly kept.

Historically, theatre has been a space of coded queerness. From Shakespeare's cross-dressing characters to musical theatre's embrace of camp aesthetics, queer narratives have long existed within theatrical expression—even when they were unspoken. In the early 20th century, Broadway and cabaret spaces functioned as underground sanctuaries for queer artists, particularly in cities like New York and Berlin (Bronski 2011). But these spaces were also shaped by their proximity to whiteness, maleness, and class privilege. They were rarely inclusive of all queer people—especially women, trans folks, and people of color.

In educational theatre, that legacy has continued. The narrative of theatre as a "safe space" is powerful—but often incomplete. We may create environments that support some forms of queerness—often the palatable, white, cisgender kind—but exclude or marginalize others through curriculum, casting, and culture. For example, I've seen students celebrated for their "flamboyant" energy in rehearsal but discouraged from choosing design topics that center drag culture or trans identity. I've worked in programs that pride themselves on inclusion but assign only canonical plays written by white men, with exclusively binary-gendered characters.

The gap between intention and impact is real.

Moreover, the idea of safety itself is complicated. For many queer and disabled students, "safe" means more than emotional support. It means not being misgendered in class. It means having access to alternative assignment formats. It means not having to explain your existence for the benefit of others. As theatre educators, we must grapple with the reality that our field, while progressive in



The Croqui Project offers croquis representing a wide range of bodies. | Images courtesy The Croqui Project, created by Mandy Rojas and Devan Freedman.

ethos, still reflects the power dynamics of the broader society in which it operates (hooks 1994; Gay 2018).

In the current political moment, these dynamics are becoming more visible—and more urgent. With legislation across multiple states restricting what can be said about race, gender, and sexuality in schools, the arts are no longer an assumed safe zone. We're seeing books pulled from libraries, teachers dismissed for sharing their pronouns, and curriculum policies rewritten to prohibit even the suggestion of LGBTQ+ lives (GLSEN 2023). For many educators, this is not new—it's an escalation of the silencing they've already learned to navigate. But the speed and scale of these attacks make the stakes feel higher than ever.

And yet, amidst this storm, technical theatre educators have a unique opportunity. Because while much of the public debate centers around language—what can or cannot be said—our work often speaks through other means. Through light and color. Through shape and silhouette. Through texture, rhythm, and spatial arrangement. In this context, design becomes a site of subversion. When naming queerness is forbidden, designing it in becomes a radical act.

Theatre educators, particularly those working in design and production,

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can leverage the affordances of our field to teach for inclusion, even when inclusion cannot be explicitly named.

Because the truth is this: they can censor our language, but not our lighting designs. They can restrict scripts, but not the stories told through thoughtfully crafted props and scenery. They can monitor our classrooms—but they cannot fully grasp the quiet revolution that unfolds when design is taught with intention.

Theatre has always been a space of transformation. The question now is how we, as educators, will use that legacy, not merely to protect, but to provoke. Not just to survive, but to imagine and build classrooms that are freer, more inclusive, and more just.

The Hidden Curriculum of Design

In any educational setting, what we say we teach is only part of the story. Beneath every syllabus lies another layer—a silent but powerful system of norms, assumptions, and traditions that shape how students learn and who they believe theatre is for. In culturally responsive pedagogy, this is often called the "hidden curriculum" (Gay 2018). In technical theatre, this hidden curriculum is deeply embedded in design language, material choices, visual standards, and unspoken expectations.

For example, in my first year teaching lighting design, I followed the structure I'd learned in graduate school: Introduce the McCandless method, work through additive color mixing, and then assign students a script to render. I didn't question why the design textbooks I used were illustrated primarily with white actors. I didn't ask why default gel recommendations emphasized pinks and ambers that flatten darker skin tones. I didn't yet know that the tools I was passing on had been built for bodies that looked like mine—white, male-presenting, able-bodied—and that my failure to contextualize them was part of the problem (Taylor 2022; Perkins forthcoming).

This phenomenon is widespread. In programs across the country—whether conservatory-style BFA programs or public high school electives—technical theatre instruction often reinforces narrow visual standards under the guise of "professionalism." Students are taught to render proportionate figures without learning how cultural dress modifies silhouette. They're told to design "believable" interiors without recognizing how realism has been coded to reflect whiteness and class. Scenic flats become drywall apartments. Period costumes default to Victorian or Edwardian ball gowns. Even basic costume assignments often ask for "a masculine look" or "a feminine outfit," offering students no language, tools, or permission to design beyond the binary.

This is not merely a failure of imagination—it's a pedagogical failure.

When educators don't interrogate the hidden curriculum, we teach that good design means conformity to dominant aesthetics. We signal to students who are trans, nonbinary, disabled, Black, Indigenous, or otherwise marginalized that their stories—and bodies—are exceptions. Or worse, invisible.

Even in programs that pride themselves on inclusion, the gaps show. A friend teaching at a private arts college recently shared that although the department celebrates LGBTQ+ visibility in acting and directing, there's "no vocabulary or structure" in place for discussing gender-expansive design. In another school, a student asked whether they could submit a non-realistic model for a scenic assignment and was told, "Sure, but that's not how it would work in the real world." This imaginary "real world" functions as a gatekeeper—one that disproportionately excludes non-dominant cultural expressions.

The good news is: design education offers countless opportunities to push back against this logic.

When I revised my lighting design unit to include lessons on skin tone visibility and cultural color symbolism, the shift was immediate. Students of color felt invited into the conversation. One student said, "I didn't know lighting was something I could be good at—no one had ever talked about how light hits my skin before." Another asked if they could design cues inspired by the Black Lives Matter flag. Of course, I said yes. Why hadn't that always been the baseline?

Scenic design also benefits from this reframing. Rather than requiring a naturalistic space, I now ask students to render metaphoric environments. For example, what does a kitchen table look like in a queer household? How do you stage grief in a space where ancestors live in the walls? What happens when a room bends or stretches to reflect internal states of being? These questions invite students to draw on cultural heritage, trauma, joy, and spatial memory—not just architectural reference.

In costume design, inclusive practices might involve exploring cultural and gender-expansive dress practices from around the world: the hijra of South Asia, the two-spirit regalia of Native North Americans, or contemporary queer club fashion (Bronski 2011). Students can learn how garments communicate identity—not as performance for others, but as affirmation of self. And instead of framing costume around "accuracy," we shift the question: For whom is this accurate? What context is being served?

These interventions don't just benefit marginalized students. They make all students better designers—more thoughtful, more culturally fluent, and more adaptable.

The hidden curriculum also lives in our tools and templates. Who are our rendering guides modeled after? What bodies are represented in the mannequins and forms we buy for our shops? Are we teaching alternative ways to model, sketch, or drape for fat bodies, prosthetic users, or performers with nontraditional mobility? How do we talk about costuming when the actor is in a binder, a wheelchair, or a headscarf?

When we normalize these questions, we dismantle the assumption that theatre is one thing, done one way, for one type of person. We give our students permission to design the world not as it is, but as they dream it could be.

Inclusive Design in Practice

While unlearning harmful design defaults is essential, technical theatre educators must also cultivate new habits—habits rooted in care, equity, and visibility. Inclusive teaching is not just a reactive stance against exclusion; it is a generative process that invites students into creative agency. This is especially powerful in design-based classrooms, where openness to interpretation is already central.

In my own courses, I build inclusivity through a framework of choice, using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to allow students multiple modes of demonstrating their knowledge (CAST 2018). Every major project includes at least three submission options: digital or hand-drawn renderings, written design justifications, or video presentations. For students with limited access to materials or who struggle with traditional writing formats, this lowers the barrier to entry while increasing the opportunity for authentic expression.

For example, in my props design unit, I asked students to create a "Memory Object" inspired by a moment from their own lives or a story they connected with. One student—who had recently come out as nonbinary—chose to adapt a childhood toy into a ceremonial object for a fantasy play. They added adornments that symbolized rebirth and used recycled materials to reflect their values around sustainability. Another student, a first-generation Dominican American, created a family altar using miniature food, candles, and fabric scraps passed down from relatives. These projects weren't just about craftsmanship—they became affirmations of identity and belonging. And because the rubric emphasized clarity of storytelling and cultural symbolism, students succeeded based on their creativity and relevance, not traditional notions of technical perfection.

In costume design, inclusive practice

often begins with language. Instead of asking students to design "for a male or female character," I frame projects around identity affirmation: What makes this character feel at home in their body? How do their clothes reflect their experience of gender, culture, age, or ability? One student designed a wardrobe for a teenage trans boy who had just come out and was attending his first school dance. The design included layering strategies, neutral tones, and subtle tailoring that the student said, "would make him feel confident and safe." Another project explored Indigenous regalia for a contemporary character navigating urban and ancestral ties. These weren't just outfits—they were tools for embodiment.

I also emphasize UDL-aligned scaffolding throughout the process. Students are encouraged to create "moodboard stories" before diving into sketching. They can present orally or visually. I provide examples from professional designers across a range of disciplines and identities—not just Tony winners, but community theatre costumers, drag artists, cultural historians, and youth designers. This aligns with what Geneva Gay calls culturally responsive teaching—centering student knowledge and lived experience as valid forms of academic engagement (Gay 2018).

In lighting design, we often begin with a conversation about visibility. Whose skin tones are considered the "baseline" in our training? Whose emotional states are we asked to represent with color, and why? I reference designers like Kathy Perkins, who has written extensively on how lighting for Black and Brown bodies must move beyond flat illumination and toward dimension, depth, and warmth (Perkins forthcoming). Clifton Taylor's workshops on skin tone palettes have also helped students see how technical decisions are always racialized, even when framed as neutral (Taylor 2022).

One of my students used this learning in a production of "She Kills Monsters," where a Black femme character was often staged in dim, moody fantasy scenes. The student shifted the palette from cool ambers and steel blues to warm purples and honey-toned backlight. The result was a stage picture that not only preserved the show's atmosphere but affirmed the performer's presence with dignity and glow. "I wanted her to look like the main character," the student said, "because she is."

A costume design by Anais Escobar. | Courtesy of Anais Escobar.

Scenic design provides yet another space to disrupt assumed norms. When teaching "setting and space," I challenge students to consider nontraditional architecture, diasporic homes, queer spatial logic, and culturally-specific environmental design. One student reimagined "The Glass Menagerie" as a surreal, queer memoryscape with floating objects and shifting walls, citing ballroom culture as a reference. Another turned a classic kitchen scene into a modular space with ramps, wide doors, and textures designed for sensory integration—thinking about access as part of aesthetic.

These interventions are not gimmicks. They are pedagogical strategies grounded in empathy and rigor. They challenge students to design with others in mind, while also reflecting on their own positionality. As bell hooks reminds us, "education as the practice of freedom" must involve the recognition of difference, the celebration of identity, and the refusal to normalize exclusion (hooks 1994).

These projects also change the culture of the classroom. When students see their identities reflected and their ideas taken seriously, they become more confident, collaborative, and generous. I've seen cisgender students rethink assumptions about silhouette after working alongside trans classmates. I've seen multilingual students use their home languages on labels and charts when given the option. I've seen students bring in traditions from their communities—Kwanzaa candles, quinceañera dresses, grief altars—and transform them into central design features.

None of this requires sacrificing design integrity. On the contrary, these practices enhance it. They allow us to teach theatre design not just as skill, but as social and emotional intelligence.

The Curriculum is the Closet

There's a phrase I often return to when reflecting on my journey as a queer educator: "The curriculum is the closet." It was true when I began teaching in Texas, and it's even more true now.

Across the United States, public education is under siege—not by budget cuts alone, but by coordinated campaigns to erase queer and trans lives from the classroom. Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has exploded since 2021, with policies restricting what educators can say about gender, sexuality, and even family structures. Some states have passed so-called "Don't Say Gay" laws that ban any mention of LGBTQ+ topics in grades K–12. Others allow parents to sue schools for teaching content they deem "inappropriate"—often defined broadly and politically (GLSEN 2023).

This movement isn't just targeting curriculum. It's targeting people. Teachers have been investigated or fired for displaying Pride flags, including queer authors in reading lists, or answering student questions about pronouns. In Florida, a school district removed a teacher's photo with her same-sex partner from the classroom wall. In Missouri, a teacher was forced to resign after discussing her nonbinary identity during a Q&A (GLSEN 2023).

For queer educators—particularly those in technical theatre—this creates a profound tension. We are encouraged to support students, build inclusive classrooms, and lead with empathy. But many of us are doing that work under a cloud of fear. We've learned to self-censor, to be vague when students ask about our lives, to keep our pronouns off the board and our families off the slide decks. We worry that a supportive comment might be reported. That a casting choice might be questioned. That an identity-affirming design might draw the wrong kind of attention.

In my own career, I've worked in both affirming institutions and conservative schools. In some, I was celebrated for bringing an equity lens to theatre design. In others, I was warned to "keep politics out of it" when I simply included queer narratives in a props assignment. I once removed a Pride sticker from my tool chest after a parent complained. I've replaced gender-neutral restrooms signs with "Storage" signs during parent-teacher nights. These moments are quiet, humiliating, and far more common than we admit.

What makes this doubly complex is that technical theatre is often seen as apolitical—or at least less scrutinized than literature, health, or social studies. That perception can offer breathing room. When I taught in a district where LGBTQ+ content was banned from classrooms, I couldn't say "gay" out loud—but I could teach a props unit on protest signage. I couldn't assign queer playwrights—but I could let students pick their own scenes and cheer when they chose works by queer authors. I couldn't discuss gender expansiveness in formal terms—but I could create design prompts that centered character affirmation and choice.

This is where design becomes a tool of quiet resistance. We can assign lighting plots that use symbolism to evoke queer joy or gender fluidity. We can suggest inclusive casting breakdowns. We can normalize the use of they/them pronouns in paperwork. We can structure rubrics that reward narrative clarity over binary aesthetics. These aren't "workarounds"—they are acts of care that keep the door open, even when the hallway is full of tripwires.

But the emotional labor is real. Many queer educators live in a state of constant calculation: How out can I be in this room? Will this lesson put me at risk? Do I have allies in this building? What happens if a parent complains? These questions aren't hypothetical—they're occupational hazards.

And yet, we stay. We teach. We keep showing up—not out of masochism, but because we know what's at stake. Because we remember being the student who needed someone like us. Because even a small gesture—a name respected, a pronoun honored, a design approved—can change the course of a young person's life.

That's why professional networks matter. In the face of policy repression, queer educators need more than resilience—they need community and protection. National organizations like GLSEN, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the National Education Association (NEA) LGBTQ+ Caucus offer resources, legal guidance, and opportunities for connection. But localized support is just as crucial. At Teaching While Queer, the nonprofit and podcast I run, we've built a peer-to-peer network where educators can share stories, ask questions anonymously, and access mental health resources tailored to queer teachers.

Administrators also have a role to play. True support means more than slogans—it means explicit anti-discrimination policies, anonymous reporting systems, and training for supervisors on how to affirm LGBTQ+ staff and students. It means pushing back when school boards cave to fear. It means refusing to make "safety" conditional on silence.

If we want to build inclusive design classrooms, we have to create working environments where queer educators can thrive without hiding. We cannot teach authenticity if we're punished for living it.

So what do we do when "the curriculum is the closet"?

We build new doors. We sneak stories in through the light cues and the color palettes. We center joy in our design choices. We build coalition with students, colleagues, and other artists. And we hold onto the truth that queer survival is not passive—it is creative.

Because when we are forced to teach from the margins, our greatest tool is the imagination. And the theatre, after all, has always been a rehearsal space for futures not yet lived.

Subversive Teaching is Still Teaching

In an era of legislative repression, teaching has become a battleground—and for many queer educators, every lesson is a negotiation. But in this charged moment, it's important to remember: subversive teaching is still teaching. In fact, it may be the most essential kind.

Subversion in education doesn't always come with fanfare. Often, it comes quietly. It's the syllabus line that invites students to bring in their cultural narratives. It's the choice to assign a lighting cue inspired by queer iconography. It's

the comment in class that validates a student's pronoun, even when the district policy pretends they don't exist. These acts might seem small—but they are the fabric of a classroom where students and educators alike can breathe.

As bell hooks reminds us, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks 1994). But that possibility is only realized when educators are brave enough to risk discomfort—our own and others'. In the context of technical theatre, where aesthetics, story, and structure all intersect, our power to resist through design is immense. It's also often overlooked.

Subversive teaching in a scene shop might look like sourcing binders for a costume render that affirms a trans character's identity. In a scenic unit, it might mean encouraging students to redesign a traditional play's set through a diasporic or decolonial lens. In lighting design, it could mean critiquing the myth of "neutral" white light and exploring what warmth and visibility look like for all skin tones (Taylor 2022; Perkins forthcoming). These aren't add-ons. They are essential shifts that challenge the unspoken values we inherit through "tradition."

Of course, this kind of work isn't without cost. Many queer educators experience a profound emotional toll from constantly navigating these decisions. Do we push forward with an inclusive lesson and risk scrutiny, or play it safe? Can we advocate for a student while protecting ourselves? Should we out ourselves in a staff meeting to challenge a biased comment, or let it pass?

These micro-decisions accumulate into what mental health professionals now call minority stress—the ongoing cognitive and emotional strain of living in systems not built for your survival (Meyer 2003). For queer educators, especially those who are trans, disabled, or educators of color, this stress is compounded by professional precarity. In districts without union protection or affirming leadership, simply being out can feel like a liability.

But amidst the exhaustion, there's also incredible joy. Subversive teaching allows us to rewrite the script. To reimagine the classroom. To redefine what rigor, excellence, and visibility can mean.

In my work at the City College of New York, I've had the privilege of watching this joy unfold in real time. A student once told me they'd never thought of themselves as a designer because "designers are all cis guys with toolbelts." But after a unit on culturally rooted scenic design, they built a scale model based on their grandmother's kitchen altar, complete with hand-painted candles and memory objects. "This is the first project I've ever felt was mine," they said. That's not just a successful assignment—it's a reclaiming.

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Another student created a lighting sequence based on the colors of the bisexual pride flag, woven into a fantasy scene in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. No one else in the class noticed, but the student told me later, "That was for me. And for anyone else who might see it."

This is the beauty of subversion through design—it's often invisible to those who would try to silence us, and blazingly visible to those who need to see it.

As educators, we are often taught to measure success through outcomes: test scores, reviews, resumes. But for those of us teaching on the edge—teaching while queer, teaching through fear, teaching with resistance—success looks different. It looks like a student feeling safe enough to come out. It looks like an entire class using inclusive language without being prompted. It looks like design that tells the truth even when the script can't.

To do this work sustainably, we need support systems that affirm our methods and our identities. We need professional development that reflects inclusive design pedagogy. We need leadership that understands how pedagogy intersects with politics. And we need each other—peer networks, mentorship spaces, and communities of care that remind us we are not alone.

Because the truth is, subversive teaching *is* real teaching. It is rigorous, it is intentional, and it is deeply effective. It fosters critical thinking, empathy, creativity, and connection. And perhaps most importantly, it tells our students: You don't have to conform to belong.

That's a message many of us needed to hear when we were younger. And it's one we must keep delivering—through scene shops and costume closets, cue sheets and rubrics, every light plot and storyboard.

Because when our institutions fail to protect us, when policy strips away our visibility, teaching becomes a radical act of hope.

Foundation of Inclusion

For all the challenges we face in the current political moment, theatre educators are uniquely positioned to model something radically different: a classroom that is both a rehearsal and a blueprint for liberation. If design is the art of shaping environments, then our teaching practices—our syllabi, our project prompts, our rubrics, our room setups—are already designs. They reflect what we value, what we make visible, and who we imagine our students to be.

So what would it look like to design a model of theatre education where inclusion wasn't an afterthought, but the foundation?

First, it would mean shifting away from scarcity and gatekeeping. For too long, access to high-quality technical theatre education has been limited to well-funded programs with deep industry ties. A future model of equitable design

training must expand access to tools, resources, and mentorship for students in rural schools, Title I schools, and programs serving marginalized communities. This could mean:

- Developing open educational resources (OERs) like *Crafting Theatrical Magic* that provide no-cost, high-quality materials rooted in inclusive pedagogy.
- Partnering with local theatre companies to create mentorship pipelines for BIPOC, disabled, and queer students interested in design careers.
- Advocating for equitable funding models at the district and state level to ensure all students have access to scene shops, costume closets, and technical instruction.

Second, it would require centering student agency and authorship. In design classes, we often control the prompt, the script, and the vision. But what happens when students generate the work themselves? What if we trained them not just to execute design—but to be conceptualizers, dramaturgs, and cultural critics?

In my courses, I've started ending the semester with a "Design for Change" project. Students choose a social issue they care about—racial justice, mental health, disability rights—and create a theatrical design that embodies their response. Some create installations, others digital models or short performances. One student created a set entirely out of plastic waste from campus recycling bins and used projection mapping to show the impact of environmental racism. Another built a costume series inspired by queer ballroom fashion, complete with embedded lights and a statement on trans visibility.

These projects don't just showcase technical skill—they model how theatre can serve as public dialogue. And in doing so, they prepare students not just for the stage—but for civic life.

Third, we must embed interdependence and care as pedagogical values. The myth of the lone genius still permeates design education, where students are expected to stay late, pull all-nighters, and "pay their dues." But this ethic often excludes disabled students, student parents, and those balancing work, school, and survival. In contrast, a future-facing model of theatre education:

- Honors boundaries and mental health
- Builds collaborative structures where feedback is relational, not hierarchical
- Encourages co-teaching, peer mentoring, and process-based assessment

This also means decentering white, Euro-American narratives as the default "canon." We must uplift the design traditions of communities that have always innovated through necessity: Indigenous pageantry, Black spectacle, queer nightlife, drag, ritual, and oral storytelling. We should teach students not just how to use a lightboard or sew a hem, but how to design through the lens of resistance and reclamation.

Finally, we need structural change. That includes:

- Revising certification standards to reflect inclusive design pedagogy
- Demanding that technical theatre licensure include coursework on race, gender, disability, and culturally responsive education
- Creating national grants for queer, trans, and disabled design educators to create curriculum, research, and professional networks

We cannot design a more just theatre without redesigning theatre education. And we cannot redesign education without reimagining who it is for.

The truth is, our students are already building this future. Every time they reject the binary, challenge the canon, or bring their grandmother's altar into a scenic design, they are queering the space. Our job is to make room. To scaffold that brilliance. To reflect it back through the lights, the fabric, the sound, the frame.

The theatre classroom is not just a place to prepare for the industry—it is a place to shape it. And if we design it right, it can be a place where all students learn that they are not only allowed to take up space—but to create it.

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