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## **ADDENDA: Diversity Statement**

*(While not a required document for application, I am respectfully submitting this diversity statement as an important reflection on my values and how I have approached my work throughout my professional career.)*

I have had the good fortune to be engaged in diverse, vibrant artistic dialogues since the beginning of my professional career as Associate Producer for New Play Development at Center Theatre Group (CTG). When I joined CTG in 1997, the Taper Playwright Labs were already well established: LTI - Latino Theatre Initiative, Blacksmys, ATW - Asian Theatre Workshop, Writers Workshop, and Other Voices - a lab for playwrights and artists with disabilities. Our collective raison d'être was to champion and produce new diverse stories that represented the communities of Southern California.

While my work and personal values were deeply impacted by all the remarkable artists with whom I was privileged to work, I want to share the impact the playwright John Belluso had on me, and ultimately on the architecture of the Kirk Douglas Theatre and Mark Taper Forum.

John used a wheelchair. He had a degenerative bone disease that ultimately took his life. He was a fierce advocate and champion for the disabled community. Access, equity, anger, and appreciation coursed through his political plays.

John also didn't have a car. In L.A., that meant since all of us in New Play Development travelled in a pack, that we all became intimately familiar with the obstacles that John faced as we travelled to second story theaters and rehearsal rooms without ramps. This came to a head when John received the Sherwood Award at the Taper. The award ceremony traditionally took place on the opening night of a production and involved having the honoree join Gordon Davidson on stage. The Taper had wheelchair accessible seats in the theater, but it had no ramp backstage and all the dressing rooms were up a flight of stairs. To accept his award, John was supposed to make it from the audience to the stage. There was no accessible route. The architecture of the building never contemplated that someone using a wheelchair might be an artist on stage.

It was a painful realization.

At the same time, I was working with the architects and theater consultants on the new Kirk Douglas Theatre. The theatre consultants, who had been engaged on the project before the architects, had designed a theater that required everyone in the audience to go up a flight of stairs to enter the theater. It was a lovely design, but save for an elevator that would allow someone to sit in the very back row, totally inaccessible.

John's presence on our artistic staff and as a friend made that wholly unacceptable. There was no way I could share a set of plans that excluded John who had extolled the merits of universal design.

I worked with our production department to come up with a different design strategy that had the entire theater from the backstage dressing rooms to the front entrance all on a single level: meaning both artists and audience—whether they used a wheelchair or not—could gain access to the theater without encountering a single stair.

In June of 2002, I proudly shared the plans with John, but sheepishly apologized that there were indeed stairs in the building in addition to an elevator. John wasn't finished teaching me when he said, "It's not about removing all challenges. It's about ensuring that everyone has a choice which challenges they want to tackle."

The resulting building embraced universal design delivering a theater that could, with removable seats, rows, and an elevator, accommodate a full 30% of its audience in wheelchairs, far exceeding ADA requirements. The theater we built wasn't only more accessible for people using wheelchairs, it was a more welcoming theater for the entire audience and everyone who worked there. Universal design was good design.

This experience changed how I thought about diversity and accessibility and my role as an advocate and ally. Were it not for John's presence and friendship the very architecture of the building would be different.

I have learned that a commitment to a diverse, welcoming culture must be continual and requires a humble desire to constantly learn and evolve.

I became Chair of the Theatre Arts Department at CSULB the summer of George Floyd's murder. Prompted by the national reckoning that followed, our student body shared stories of the pain, trauma, and exclusion that they had experienced within our department. I began an ongoing process to change the department culture by retaining the California Center for Equality and Justice to engage students, faculty, and staff in a restorative justice process that would help us understand how the culture of our department was unwelcoming and exclusive. The process, with an all white tenured faculty, myself included, has not been easy.

That initial engagement has extended to: a re-examination of the department curriculum; broad student engagement and enfranchisement; the development and implementation of new transparent policies and procedures that involve students in season selection, removal of gatekeeping policies and practices; a commitment to the centering of student work; and the development of a framework and methodology for an ongoing interrogation of our pedagogical strategies and materials.

While I am quite proud of the progress we have made, there is much more work to do and we are still only at the beginning of what I know will be an enduring journey.

The lesson I am learning every day is how profound one's commitment to this ongoing work must be. I discover with each semester how deep the structural barriers are and how much work still needs to be done. There is no other choice. If we are to equitably serve our students and fulfill our mission as educators for our communities, we must ensure this process is continual and ever present.

I know that our schools and communities, like the theater John Belluso made better, will be more welcoming for all of us.