

CUADC Guidelines for making inclusive, identity-conscious theatre

*CUADC believes that each of its members – regardless of their identity – has a responsibility to **acknowledge** their internalisation of biases against racial minorities and other marginalised identities and **actively contribute** to mitigating the effects of these biases.*

A complex combination of factors- many of which go beyond the conscious control of both audience and actor- shape both an actor's performance and how an audience [member] subsequently perceives this. While it is often possible to draw clear qualitative comparisons between auditions, there may too be instances where several auditionees perform to such a standard that the 'qualitative' difference between them is [almost] negligible. In these cases, meaningful distinction becomes difficult, and the final casting decision ends up being relatively arbitrary.

Instead of posing a dilemma, these instances – among several others – can represent opportunities to increase representation of marginalised identities onstage.

This document serves as guidance on how to balance increased representation of marginalised identities with creating a safe and inclusive space for disadvantaged groups. Primarily intended for anyone pitching or staging a CUADC show, this document will still contain useful information for anyone involved with Cambridge student theatre. While neither perfect nor exhaustive and thus subject to ongoing evaluation, it hopefully addresses the major issues!

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email [**diversityandinclusion@cuadc.org**](mailto:diversityandinclusion@cuadc.org)

The first section of this document sets out terms commonly used to signal inclusive casting, explaining the differences between each, intending to foster a collective understanding of what these terms mean and to ensure careful, consistent usage.

1. 'Identity-blind' (race/colour-blind; gender-blind/neutral; ability-blind etc.)

Typically, the 'identity-blind' label implies that differences in race or skin colour **play no role** in determining an auditionee's suitability for a given role. While users may consciously intend to consider auditionees irrespective of racial, gender or ability markers, phrasal iterations of identity-blindness misleadingly suggest that unconscious bias is disposable, that an actor's performance is somehow immune to the social reflexes with which we daily label bodies based on pre-existing racial, gender, sexuality, and ability norms, as well as to the assumptions these categorisations engender.

Therefore, CUADC discourages use of any such term that implies a disregard for identity markers: these constitute pseudo-inclusivity.

2. 'Non-traditional'

This label predominantly applies to texts with longstanding performance traditions and theatre that draws on historical events. Its usage is self-explanatory, signifying a departure from traditional gender norms or a traditional historical narrative. It is important to note that this differs from race-blind and gender-blind in its intentional subversion of traditional power dynamics, or its divergence from historic performance norms.

Examples include *Hamilton* (where BIPOC actors play the white 'founders' of America); Iqbal Khan's 2015 production of *Othello* (where a Black actor played Iago); Michelle Terry's 2018 production of *Hamlet* (where a male actor played Ophelia). In this way, non-traditional encourages creatives and audiences alike to draw out new dimensions in familiar characters and narratives.

3. 'Identity-conscious' (colour-conscious; gender-conscious; ability-conscious etc.)

The label 'identity-conscious' considers the visible aspects of an auditionee's identity in relation to that of a character rather than attempting to ignore these aspects. For instance: how does casting a BIPOC, trans or disabled actor reconfigure the character's narrative and what happens to them; the dynamics of relationships within a play; the overall message?

Inevitably, gender-conscious casting is not as feasible for writing less than 70 years old, due to the need to preserve the writer's artistic licence. However, where characters are neither racialised nor written as disabled, the CUADC encourages production teams to consider the above questions as a starting point rather than assuming the existence of a supposed 'neutral' identity when this is in fact the white, able, cisgender body that imagination defaults to.

CUADC recognises identity-conscious casting as an intentional approach that actively acknowledges race, gender and ability both as part of the casting process and post-casting (character development during rehearsals and audience perception during performance).

The second part of this document lists recommendations specific to different marginalised groups and advice on reducing disadvantage, aiming to maximise identity-conscious casting practice while prioritising the health, safety, and emotional wellbeing of those concerned.

Specific recommendations: Gender

- Where applicable, list character's gender rather than auditionee's gender, to accommodate auditionees with non-traditional gender identities.
- Encourage, but do not mandate pre-casting pronoun sharing to minimise the discomfort of auditionees whose gender identity is frequently misread, but also to avoid coercing auditionees into outing themselves or labelling themselves where they do not feel comfortable doing so.
- In the case of new [student] writing where gender plays no central part in a character's narrative, the CUADC encourages production teams to leave characters' gender identities entirely open.

*For more detailed guidance on making the audition process as trans-inclusive as possible, please see [this document](#) from the *Cambridge Trans Theatre Collective**

Specific recommendations: Race & Visible Disability

- In a tie-breaker situation where multiple actors reach an equally castable standard, CUADC encourages production teams – in the interests of minority representation – to prioritise those with marginalised identities, especially visibly belonging to racial minorities and actors with visible disabilities.
- It is important to think critically about the implications of a particular casting or creative choice: For example, does a particular casting decision reinforce or perpetuate negative stereotypes about people with disabilities or racial minorities?
- In cases where roles are open to all actors regardless of identity, it is unfair to expect that disabled actors or those belonging to a racial, cultural or religious minority will be open to incorporating this into their role. Thus, CUADC advises against casting actors **solely** based on their identity.
- In cases where a role is exclusively open to BIPOC or to disabled actors, it may be more acceptable to consider how the auditioning actor's specific racial/cultural identity or specific disability affects a character's narrative, if at all.
- CUADC advises against othering, pseudo-inclusive casting process measures such as "BME drop-in hour". When considering possible implementations, CUADC urges production teams to think productively and sincerely about their impact on marginalised and disadvantaged groups, instead of engaging in self-interested, performative allyship.

Reasonable Adjustments: Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, Neurodiversity & Physical Disability

- **Pre-casting:** CUADC encourages production teams to continue offering reasonable adjustments such as alternative modes of auditioning, flexible deadlines and releasing audition extracts prior to auditions. This makes auditioning more inclusive and accessible by default, thereby reducing the onus on auditionees with disabilities to pursue self-advocacy.
- **Post-casting/appointment:** CUADC encourages production teams to circulate a welfare and reasonable adjustments form to cast/production team members where individuals can share information about SEMH needs, suggest reasonable adjustments they would benefit from and establish an ongoing dialogue about health, safety and wellbeing issues. With the respondent's consent, this information would then be shared with relevant members of the production team.

Post-Casting Recommendations: Identity Conscious Practice

- CUADC encourages production teams, especially those staging new [student] writing to forge meaningful interplay between the actor's identity, and that of their character, without radically altering the role as the writer intends it. The company strongly recommends that these changes be made, as far as possible, in consultation with the respective actor without placing a burden on them. Examples might include, but are not limited to:
 - Change of character's name, to reflect a religious or cultural background that the actor's appearance typically signifies
 - Addition of references to the actor's cultural or racial identity or one that the actor's appearance typically signifies, to an actor's disability (especially if visible), or an actor's non-cisgender identity.
 - The CUADC advises production teams to emphasise that this meaningful interplay is an optional part of the creative process and has no bearing on the casting process.

*In any situation, it is **always essential** to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of actors over an agenda of increasing diversity. What this means will differ between contexts. However, prioritising issues of inclusion (fostering a safe, inclusive space for an individual) always before issues of diversity (representation of minority group(s)) is a useful rule of thumb to follow.*