



LANGUAGE

Phrases That No Longer Have a Place in the Theatrical Workspace

As many theaters make moves towards greater diversity and inclusivity, let's reflect on how each of us can contribute to dismantling long-standing oppressive norms within the theater community. A meaningful step in this direction involves evolving our workplace language. Even through these small individual efforts, we can challenge the status quo that has often disregarded and disrespected ALL of us, not only many of our BIPOC colleagues. Words hold immense power, shaping people's experiences. By adopting more inclusive language, we honor and uplift every individual in our community and work towards a safe and more inclusive environment for all!

For this month's EDIA newsletter, we wanted to focus on phrases we have all heard in the rehearsal room. These phrases, though meant colloquially as expressions, each have historical and cultural contexts rooted in discrimination. In the workplace, these sayings can have impacts that one may not anticipate or intend.

Below is a list of phrases, why they should be eliminated, and what you can say instead. Be aware that being intentional about our words and challenging racist language is an ongoing practice.

Phrase	Why?	What To Say Instead
“Cracking the whip/Whip ‘em into shape”	Whips were used as a form of physical and psychological punishment on enslaved Africans in the Americas. This history has caused massive generational traumas. Usage of this phrase is antithetical to productivity and is a reminder of a painful history.	“Getting things in order,” “Get them into shape,” “Focus Up”
“Let’s have a Pow Wow”	The official definition of “Pow Wow” is “any gathering of Native people.” This is inappropriate for the rehearsal room to describe a small group meeting, especially considering the significance and sacred practices celebrated in a real Pow Wow.	“let’s gather,” “circle up,” “meeting,” “huddle.”
“Bottom of the Totem Pole”	Totem poles are monumental carvings associated with Native cultures in Canada and the Pacific Northwest. Each figure on a totem pole has massive spiritual significance, and often represents kinship and family, guardian spirits and helpers. Using this term to describe direct reports and entry level positions is inappropriate and makes no sense.	“Bottom of the ladder,” “Gofer,” or simply using the persons job title
“No can do”/ “Can do” And “Long Time No See”	It may seem like you are saving time skipping a few words but the usage of these sayings stem from a racist history. These phrases originally mimicked and denigrated Chinese immigrant speech patterns.	“I can’t do that,” “Can’t make that happen,” / “I can do that,” “Sure thing!” and “It’s been a long time!” or “Good to see you!”
“Hang the blacks”	Usually used backstage in reference to hanging black curtains, this phrase is so packed with racial trauma in the United States. These three words can be immensely triggering and remind us of all of the current and past violence towards Black people in this country.	“Hang the curtains ”
“Slaving away”	Who hasn’t heard this phrase during tech week? However, 10 out of 12s and long hours mounting a production are in no way comparable to the work conditions that enslaved people had to endure in the United States. This comparison is incredibly inconsiderate and disrespectful.	“working really hard,” “over worked,” or even “busting our butts!”



“Sold down the river”	This phrase also stems from historical slave practices. The evils of the slave industry were not just in physical punishment and inhumane work conditions. Families were often broken up as human lives were bought and sold, and that in no way compares to a perceived betrayal or slight in the rehearsal room	“sold out,” “betrayed,” “stabbed in the back”
“Open the Kimono”	A phrase that is both misogynistic AND racist! Still used in the rehearsal room, this refers to the practice of opening up the inner workings of an organization or company to collaborators. This phrase has roots in Japanese history, sex work history, and World War 2. It does not have any place in the rehearsal room.	“dig deeper,” “get more vulnerable,” “be transparent”
“Grandfathered In”	The origins of this term refer to post-Civil War attempts to disenfranchise black people by creating strict requirements for new voters that did not apply to the descendants of those who voted prior to 1867. It was primarily those white people who were “grandfathered in” to the vote.	“legacied,” “exempted,” “preapproved,” “inherited,” “preauthorized.”
“Peanut Gallery”	A peanut gallery was, in the days of vaudeville, a nickname for the cheapest and seats in the theater, a section often reserved for BIPOC patrons. The insinuation here is that those that sat in this section were rowdy, loud, and heckled the performers, which in itself has racist connotations of how BIPOC audience members are received.	“audience,” “crowd,” “hecklers,” “critics”
“Cakewalk”	The cakewalk was a pre-Civil War dance originally performed by slaves on plantation grounds. The dance was first known as the “prize walk”; the prize was an elaborately decorated cake. Plantation owners would act as judges. It has since been twisted to mean “easy victory.” The history of slavery and slave practices do not need to be referenced in the rehearsal space.	“Easy,” “a breeze,” “a piece of cake”
“Blacklist, Blackball, Blackmail, Black market”	The association of the color black with negative, evil, wrong, or bad carries racist undertones. Because of Black people’s history, associating the term black with bad can be harmful.	“blocked list”, “closed list,” “denylist”
“Cattle Call”	Usually referring to a mass, open audition, the conflation of people to cattle has implications and associations with the chattel buying and selling of humans as livestock and property.	“open audition” “casting call”
“Master list,” “Master sheet” “Master Script”	It is time to move away from “master/slave” rhetoric. It may seem like a small thing but equating the final and correct version of something as “master” has historical and cultural implications that can be ostracizing.	“Final list,” “Primary sheet,” “Bible”
Gypsy, Gypsy Robe	The term “gypsy” has become a common term in the theatre profession when referring to Broadway dancers and ensemble members. This term is now universally considered a racial slur for the Romani people.	“Swing,” “Ensemble,” “Legacy Robe”

Remember: Language evolves, and doing better requires grace, patience and empathy for both ourselves and others.