

HEALING OUR COMMUNITIES

BY RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON
+ ANDRÉ DE SHIELDS

On June 4, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and 10 days after the murder of George Floyd, a virtual town hall entitled The Impact of COVID-19 and Systemic Inequity in Communities of Color was presented in New York. Convened to address proposed FY21 city funding for arts institutions and subtitled "A Holistic Plan for Healing Our Communities," the town hall was presented by the office of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer; 42 members of the Coalition of Theatres of Color, a nonprofit consortium; and the Arts and Culture Committee of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, the Harlem Arts Alliance, and the Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance.

*Among the speakers were Tony Award winners **Ruben Santiago-Hudson** and **André De Shields**. Their remarks, lightly edited and reprinted with permission, follow.*

Ruben Santiago-Hudson: What We Do Is Sacred

First of all, thank you for giving me the opportunity to be among you and to have a voice. This is a day in a time of chaos, and a time of uncertainty, and it probably would be easy to just ball up in a corner and cry. Because everyone says the same thing. They're tired, and sometimes you get weary. But this is not a time to ball up and cry. You can choose to have a voice to speak, and I appreciate that you have given me an opportunity to be with the village. Because there's no stronger place to be than surrounded by like-minded people who are fighting for the same things. And those things are dignity, humanity, and all the things that the Great Creator endowed us with.

Let me tell you a little story. I came to New York in 1983, and there was a lot of uncertainty surrounding me. Uncertainty about being an artist: can you make it, is there a place for you, can you be successful, can you find a career, can you

take care of your family? But there was one thing that was certain. There were a lot of opportunities to go and express myself, to work my art, to find a theatre family, whether it was downtown at the New Federal Theatre, or uptown with the National Black Theatre, the Negro Ensemble Company, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, and on and on. I knew that if I had nothing, I had somewhere to go and say, "I'm here, let me

offer my services, let me be a part of what you're doing."

When we threaten these organizations, we take the opportunity and the ability for human beings to express themselves; to tell you where they hurt; to tell you what they need; to tell you how they feel; and, in a strange and wonderful way, to heal you. I know there's a lot of work to do in the city. I know there's a lot of work to do in the country, in the state. This is a terribly tumultuous time, but one thing we absolutely need is the healers. The people who are running into the hospitals to help heal people, even the law enforcement officers who are running to protect people who are in the streets, people who are protecting each other. We're all running into things and trying to heal and protect. Ultimately, what it comes down to is when this is under control—and I have faith that it will get under control, and better than that—when it is done, and those fighters are weary, and those fighters are beaten, and those fighters need to be



Chris Thomas King + **Ruben Santiago-Hudson** in *Lackawanna Blues* at Center Theatre Group, written and directed by **Ruben Santiago-Hudson** PHOTO Craig Schwartz



André De Shields in *Hadestown* on Broadway, directed by Rachel Chavkin
 PHOTO Lia Chang

healed, we the artists are the healers. We will be called to heal, to use the power that God has given us, continually gives us, this special thing. We're poets. We're healers. And what we do is sacred.

When the funding is gone, and the theatres are gone, the community begins to wilt. I implore everybody that's looking at a budget (and things have to be sacrificed—I'm not foolish; I'd be remiss if I thought that things weren't gonna be sacrificed)—I ask you to look at that budget and find a way to make sure that your theatres are intact, as much as you possibly can, and we will find the ways to do things as well. We're gonna meet you somewhere, but we need to be empowered, supported, so we can do our healing.

**WE'RE POETS. WE'RE HEALERS.
 AND WHAT WE DO IS SACRED.**
 — RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

When the theatre dies in the community, the restaurant suffers, the tailor suffers, the security force suffers, the janitorial force suffers, culture suffers. And what is New York if it's not a bastion of culture, if it's not a mosaic of beautiful, wonderful, dynamic

people who all have stories that are worthy of telling? So I implore you and tell you that we need to keep our theatres intact.

I wish you all safety. Please keep the village strong, stay together. Thank you so much.

André De Shields: The Transformational Power of Theatre

I got four minutes. Here's minute number one.

This is not the time to defund the Coalition of Theatres of Color (CTC). It's a consortium of not-for-profit performing arts institutions. Now, that confuses Americans; if you're not-for-profit, they wonder what are you for. Well, the CTC is for the transformational power of theatre, because we know that theatre can change an individual's life. We know that theatre can alter governments. We know that theatre can be the transformation in the world that we all want to see. This is precisely the time that we need to support the CTC.

I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, in the late '50s and early '60s. So I had two choices. I could be a knucklehead with a life expectancy of 25 years and then be brought down by a police bullet or chokehold or knee to the neck, or I could find some way to save

myself. And but for my parents deferring their dreams, I would not be here to be a witness for, to bear testimony for, the CTC.

Born in Baltimore, educated in Wisconsin, but baptized in New York. When I came to New York in 1973, my earliest artistic homes were Ellen Stewart's La MaMa; New Federal Theatre—**Woodie King, Jr.** was its founder and continues to be the Executive Director of that gorgeous organization; and the AMAS Repertory Theatre, which was founded by Rosetta LeNoire.

In 2019, I was blessed to be the Triple Crown winner of the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, and the Tony Award. I mention that because the very first award I received in New York was an AUDELCO Award. AUDELCO, which is the Audience Development Committee, whose mission it is to recognize excellence in Black theatre. And to my knowledge, it's the only organization worldwide that does that. That happened because of the CTC.

Today, we're dealing with the coronavirus, but that is not the only infection that we need to be concerned about. There is in the air an infection of temptation: the temptation to despair; the temptation to panic, to fear; the temptation of self-pity, complacency, and apathy. Those of us in the theatre answer to those transgressions because we are the masters of language. We are the masters of emotion, the masters of intellect, and we share the same mission with the Hippocratic oath, *Primum non nocere*, and that is "First, do no harm." And moving on from that, our mission is to heal. So we're not going to be silent. We're going to heal with impunity.

Now, I may have just a minute and 30 seconds left. So I'm going to use it this way. I'm most well-known for my performance in the musical theatre. So I'm gonna take a drink of water, and I'm gonna sing us out! Okay?

*Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
 'Til earth and heaven ring,
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise
 High as the list'ning skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past
 has taught us,
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present
 has brought us;
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
 Let us march on 'til victory is won.*

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