

SUBMERSIVE productions

Shared Values Statement and Anti-Racism / Anti-Oppression Policy

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This is a living document. It should be updated with new information and awareness as it lives in real time in the daily practice of our company.

It is meant to function in conjunction with our “Submersive Productions Policy for Safe, Supported Spaces, Sexual Harassment and Abuse”

(http://submersiveproductions.com/Submersive_Safe_Spaces_Policy.pdf).

All Artistic Associates, Collective members, and production participants must read both policies and pledge to abide by them, in rule and spirit, wherever we gather.

OUR BACKGROUND AND FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

In 2014, before Submersive was a company, we began devising our first production, *The Mesmeric Revelations! of Edgar Allan Poe*. The production promised to be an immersive theatre experience focusing on the womxn* in Poe’s life and fiction. Although the initial grant to develop the piece was awarded to Glenn Ricci, he and now Co-artistic Director Ursula Marcum assembled a team of womxn to lead the production. It may seem obvious, but having female voices present at all levels of decision making made all the difference to the resulting artwork. Despite being the majority of people in the U.S., womxn are underrepresented in the arts. We made a conscious decision to invert that paradigm, and, in doing so, set the course for our company. By centering on female experiences, we felt we were investigating physical, emotional, and mythical space that still feels largely unexplored in American art making.

This gave birth to a collaborative model of art making that became Submersive’s signature:

Every work is

- 1) devised from the ground up by
- 2) predominantly womxn
- 3) reimagining history and the specific architecture we occupy
- 4) making the audience central to the telling
- 5) combining a variety of art forms
- 6) experimenting in both process and artistic output and
- 7) involving the voices and abilities of everyone in the room.

As Submersive has evolved, so has our awareness of who is in the room and how their presence affects the artwork. To be clear: for our first production, nearly all of those people were white. For our second original production (*Plunge*, 2017) we started with a team of nearly all BIPOC performers and designers charged with telling their own stories. The results were more unexpected, exciting and artistically satisfying than any individual or homogenous group could have devised. This began for us a journey that seeks to decenter, disrupt, or upend the deeply ingrained traditions born of centuries of white cishet male dominance over all aspects of our culture. It became both morally and artistically imperative that we do so.

We acknowledge that Submersive's owners and founders are white, with all of the privileges that conveys. We recognize the deep challenges any organization faces when they endeavor to decenter whiteness and maleness in their process. However, we are fully obligated and committed to continuing to find ways to pull our work further away from systems and modes of thought that have been beneficial to few and destructive to everyone.

We cannot choose the bodies we are born into, but we can change how they perform in the world. As our work activates our full bodies, and those bodies share space with the bodies of an audience, we have a choice. We can choose to perpetuate centuries of trauma as white bodies seek to gain advantage and inflict damage upon each other and align themselves violently against bodies of color. Or, we can choose the vigorous work of building an uncertain and unknown cultural alternative, where no body is supreme.

We recognize that long-dominant hierarchies and leadership styles, inherited through centuries of white supremacy, are deeply ingrained in all of us and appeal to a natural sense of familiarity and comfort. In our first five years of existence, we have discovered repeatedly that the greatest artistic gains arrive when taking risks and embracing the discomfort that results from doing so. Therein lies the unknown and, we hope, pathways to healing.

OUR VALUES

As a collaborative arts company, Submersive Productions strives to create a safe, open and equitable environment where all artists are able to contribute their best work. We believe in inclusive models of collaboration — not only to create engaging new artworks, but also to model the world we want to see, and investigate the possibilities of an equitable process in the creation of those works. We see and cherish the differences among us, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender

expression, religion, age, body shapes/sizes, physical and/or neural differences. We make wholly devised works, bringing new narratives and worlds to life. Increasingly, these narratives and worlds are inspired and shaped by the unique identities and experiences of the group's members. We believe we have a special responsibility to hold up lesser-heard and underrepresented voices, especially those of womxn, throughout the creative process. We know that art made through cooperation between a wide range of voices speaks to a wider variety of human experiences and makes space for a more diverse audience.

We choose to live and create in Baltimore, a majority Black city, because of its wide-ranging diversity and complex history. Within this rich cultural environment, Submersive will use all available aesthetic tools and social justice practices to confront injustice and inequity wherever we gather. The 2020 Juneteenth statement issued by Black Artists for Freedom (<https://blackartistsforfreedom.com/>) inspired many of our goals below, especially their call to "Imagine Black Freedom." It illustrates the power of artists to imagine — and bring forth — a world where the most varied expressions of the human experience can exist for Black people. Dismantling the rigid hierarchies and structures inherent in so much of the contemporary art world, and of white supremacist culture more broadly, will not happen overnight, but we commit to this aim as an integral part of our organization, our process, and our works.

With each new project we see an opportunity to experiment, reinvent, or disrupt our process to better reflect these values. We reserve the right to try, to fail, and to try again. Doing this kind of work requires a great amount of trust, consistency and accountability. We do not tolerate hate, violence, assault, racial slurs, or other egregious behaviors. Having many people collaborating and contributing to a project means that there will be conflict, there will be disagreement. If we are to operate as a community, we must incorporate a culture of "calling in" — addressing concerns and conflicts immediately when they arise, recognizing that discomfort will be a part of the process, and understanding that we are all learning, in perpetuity. We recognize that in this journey, we will never reach a place of stasis or perfection.

Rather, **we pledge:**

- **To keep learning:** (Example: Everyone involved in a production does and discusses dramaturgy, history, and underlying philosophies of the work.) Each new production is a chance to learn together. We view new information, cultural awareness, and discovery as a positive force.

- **To stay flexible:** (Example: If a plan to foster communication is not working in practice, flag it and devise a new solution together.) Be willing to change if the situation calls for it.
- **To never become complacent:** (Example: Learning new techniques, developing and trying new exercises and mind/body rituals throughout our process. Question artistic decisions or practices when they appeal solely to a place of comfort or tradition without any other purpose.) Keep each other on our toes. Accept change as a constant and expect it in each other.
- **To recognize the *whole* artist** who joins our process, inviting them to engage in the process beyond their specific title or role. Productions, auditions and workshops are treated as invitations to build relationships, build trust, and grow together.
- **To clearly state our policy and procedures** and share them with all in the Collective, as well as practice them in every production and project.
- **To review policy and procedures** annually, and be open to updating them at any time.

GOALS

These are our current goals as of publication of this document (Nov. 2020). Also listed are the percentages [in brackets] by which those goals were met, from our founding in 2015 to 2020. Moving forward, we will have an annual evaluation of these goals and update these percentages accordingly.

While it is difficult to give percentage goals to every group we see as underrepresented, we extend the spirit of these rules to also include a full range of human body types, gender identities, and sexual orientations, as well as those with differences in ability and neurology.

In Productions

- In order to share power, we will assemble a Core Team of artists, created anew for each project, who will shape and guide the process. (This has been an evolving core practice since our company's start.)
- At least 50% BIPOC on every Core Team for every Production, with at least one Black artist in this segment. [Past range: 0%-30%]
- At least 50% BIPOC in the cast of every production. [Past range: 0%-100%]
- At least 50% BIPOC on the crew of every production [Past range: 0%-30%]
- At least 75% womxn on the Core Team for every production [Past range: 50%-80%]

- At least 50% womxn in the cast of every production [Past range: 65%-100%]
- At least 50% womxn on the crew of every production [Past range: 50%-100%]
- All contributing artists will receive equal pay for equal work.
- Incorporate elements of intimacy coaching, anti-racism and anti-oppression training in the process of each production.
- Using the practices established with our *Policy for Safe, Supported Spaces, Sexual Harassment and Abuse* (http://submersiveproductions.com/Submersive_Safe_Spaces_Policy.pdf), agree upon a shared language and step-by-step process and use it in all of our processes should a conflict involving racism or inequity arise.
- Incorporate land acknowledgements into the content of the every production.
- We will not seek to hire, weaponize, or otherwise involve the police in the security planning for our events.
- All policies and procedures will be available in print form at every rehearsal and show.
- Each post-production evaluation period will include a review to discern if these policy goals were met.

In Organization

- Artistic Associates will be at least 51% BIPOC [Currently 55%]
- Artistic Associates will be at least 75% womxn [Currently 88%]

Overall

- The first (and often only) internship available at a given time will be open to BIPOC womxn only.
- Offer at least one workshop/training session per year to share our practices, for free, to the larger theater and arts community, with focused outreach to BIPOC artists.
- Implement a policy review every August by Co-Artistic Directors and Artistic Associates.
- Incorporate land acknowledgements into the fabric of every public event.
- Establish purposeful relationships with local colleges and universities to provide opportunities for interns and other collaborators.
- Engage with other arts organizations about establishing best practices and creating a culture of anti-racism.
- Establish regular communication with the Collective regarding anti-racism and anti-oppression work and thought.

- The most current version of this policy will always be available on our website.

This document was drafted and vetted by:

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*We define “womxn” as an intersectional, feminist, descriptive term which includes all females, whether transgender, nonbinary, queer, or cishet.