

ANNUAL REPORT

2022/23 SEASON



 **THEATRE
HORIZON**

THEATRE HORIZON'S MISSION

Theatre Horizon uses the transformative power of storytelling to foster empathy and to create an inclusive home for artists, audiences, and students alike.

A Year of Community & Belonging

This past year was marked by significant milestones that propelled us closer toward becoming a “Third Space” in Norristown—a place where people gather outside work and home to connect across boundaries through theatrical productions, education programs, and community initiatives, seeing the artist within themselves and each other.

We kicked off the 2022/23 Season with the transition of Mydera Taliah Robinson—a lifelong Norristown resident and artist—from Education Director to Director of Community Investment, focusing her leadership on Theatre Horizon’s robust education programs as well as on nourishing new and continuing partnerships and opportunities in Norristown.



Staff members on opening night of *Head Over Heels*

We also continued building upon the recommendations from our newly-launched Community Advisory Board (CAB), amplifying the voices and perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds to ensure our decision-making processes reflect the rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives that make up our Theatre Horizon community.

In the Spring, we launched *THREAD* (our first-ever Theatre Horizon Residency for Educational Artistic Development) which you can read about later in the report.

This year notably marked our first full season post-pandemic, presenting us with both challenges and successes. We celebrated the return of performances and the reopening of our lobby as a place where our community can gather for conversations, celebrations, markets, and more. We were so happy to re-engage with our most loyal patrons as well as welcome new faces into the theatre.

The 2022/23 Season also marked the return of subscriptions and the launch of our new ticket model, with tiered prices that allow patrons to choose the level that makes them most comfortable. In the name of transparency, we explained the “true cost” of a ticket to attend one of our productions to cover expenses. Notably, with this new model, the average ticket price sold was \$45.67 this year as compared to \$24.80 during previous seasons. The support

and enthusiasm from our community reflected our own beliefs in the power of the arts in times of uncertainty.

Our robust education programs continued to grow and flourish this year, empowering young artists through fun and engaging theatre experiences. We were thrilled and honored to be featured on *The Kelly Clarkson Show* in January, which highlighted our pioneering Autism Drama Program and its positive impact on individuals on the autism spectrum. The recognition we received on a national platform affirmed our commitment to fostering accessibility and equality in the arts.



*Set of TOWN on opening night, Scenic Design by Chris Haig (he/him).
Photo by John C. Hawthorne*

And finally, one of the standout achievements of the past year was the resounding success of *TOWN*, our flagship production that blurred the lines between artist and audience in ways that brought us closer than ever to our multi-



Marketing & Development Coordinator Kirsten Sughrue at a community event with the Norristown Area High School mascot

talented Norristown community. *TOWN* was Theatre Horizon's largest-scale production in our nearly 20-year history, inspired by stories from over 130 Norristown residents and featuring an ensemble of 67 community members and professional theatre artists. This groundbreaking play tackled important social issues and sparked meaningful conversations.

An article published in March by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage called Theatre Horizon an "artistic sanctuary, working toward recentering itself to better align with the Norristown Community, emerging as a leader in the regional theater field." Through the power of storytelling, *TOWN* brought people together in empathetic, creative, and joyful playmaking. Its impact has resonated far beyond its production, inspiring new partnerships and meaningful connections in our journey toward becoming a "Third Space".

**2022/23 Season
By the Numbers**

3,694
Patrons served

858
Students served

154
Artists hired

OUR ARTISTIC PROGRAMMING



Youth Chorus of TOWN. Photo by John C. Hawthorne

What happens when members of a diverse community tell a story as one?

TOWN was Theatre Horizon's largest-scale production in our nearly 20-year history. Helmed by Director Nell Bang-Jensen and playwright Michael John Garcés, this new play with original music by Philadelphia-based artist collective ILL DOOTS was written by, for, and about Norristown. Using Thornton Wilder's classic play *Our Town* as a provocation and structural map to reconsider the nostalgic myth of small-town American life and reconsider our understanding of community in the 2020s and beyond, *TOWN* provided multiple pathways for involvement from our Norristown community:

- More than 130 Norristown residents shared stories with our creative team through one-on-one interviews and story circles
- Residents participated in and provided direct feedback on the script-in-progress through public readings at community partner sites
- 36 adults and seniors participated in *TOWN* Tuesdays, a series of fundamentals of theatre and acting classes at 3 community partner sites to prepare Norristown residents for auditions; 7 were subsequently cast in *TOWN*
- An ensemble of 67 community members and professional theatre artists between

Our Productions By the Numbers

693

New Ticket Buyers

55

of Performances

the ages of 5 and 98 performed in the production. Theatre experience varied: some were Norristown-based artists; some had performed in Theatre Horizon productions previously; some were participants in our education programs (in particular our Autism Drama Program); some had never performed before; and some marked their return to the stage after years (or even decades)!

- Cast and crew ate an estimated **736 tacos** during the production process of TOWN



Over 4 performances, 1,200 people attended—29% of attendees resided in Norristown and 61% of attendees were new to Theatre Horizon, having never seen a production before TOWN. Spanish and ASL translations were offered to ensure accessibility.

TOWN was a free, outdoor event presented on the front lawn of Eisenhower Science & Technology Leadership Academy, a Norristown middle school. Multiple Norristown-based businesses and Norristown-serving organizations participated in our vendor market.

After the show, TOWN performers became Norristown celebrities! One actor shared that she would often be noticed while walking around town. *“Oh my goodness, you’re the actor from TOWN,”* she heard from someone at the library.



“It seems like I’m constantly having somebody say something about it. I’m such an advocate for [Theatre Horizon] because now it’s truly trying to make something open, accessible, and welcoming to the folks in town.” – Yasmin Brown



Major support for TOWN has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage with additional support from PNC Arts Alive.



Lenape Council Members Barbara Bluejay Michalski and Teri Hislop with the TOWN cast. Photo by John C. Hawthorne



A HOLIDAY CONCERT

Pictured: Garrick Vaughan (he/him) playing a holiday tune. Photo by John C. Hawthorne

Created and directed by Jessica Johnson and featuring cast members from Theatre Horizon's Barrymore Award-winning production of *The Color Purple*, the Holiday Concert led one audience member to comment: ***"I just want to wrap up all those lovely voices and take them home with me!"***

This year's December show was a retrospective holiday musical event that reflected on the impact the past few years had on all of us. It followed up on the community building element of *TOWN* by including several Norristown cast members in the chorus and also by asking audience members to share holiday memories that were read aloud on stage. We learned of favorite traditions, including trips to Longwood Gardens, bagel and lox Christmas brunches, interfaith dinners, and sharing Santa's chocolate chip cookies!



Pictured: Christina Foye (she/her) and Norristown Community Cast Members celebrating the holiday season. Photo by John C. Hawthorne



Pictured: Candace Benson (she/her) performing the beloved "All I Want for Christmas". Photo by John C. Hawthorne



Lexi Thammavong (they/she) and Anna Faye Lieberman (she/they). Photo by John C. Hawthorne

In February, the hilarious, queer musical comedy, *Head Over Heels*, had audiences tapping their heels and jamming out to iconic Go-Go's hits like "We Got the Beat" as we watched the royal family of Arcadia attempt to save their kingdom...and find love and acceptance along the way.



The cast of *Head Over Heels*. Photo by John C. Hawthorne

Head Over Heels was the first full musical produced at Theatre Horizon since the onset of the pandemic, and it was wonderful to have the theatre full with the energy from this show. Attendees at each performance

were enthusiastic and engaged, and nearly every show received a full standing ovation. Critics agreed and we earned a Barrymore recommendation! After seeing the show, one audience member remarked: **"Just wanted to give you a lovely queer cheer! The production today was amazing! The singing, the dancing, the lights, the sound, the acting, the voices and the message brought tears to my eyes! A great group of performers!"** We couldn't agree more!

Alongside the wonderful *Head Over Heels* lobby display created by Sheridan Merrick—our Education Coordinator & Resident Teaching Artist, and dramaturg for the musical—we invited audience members to "share the love" with Theatre Horizon. Our walls were covered with notes of love and affection for the show, the artists, and our whole team at the theatre. Thanks to Cultivation Committee member Lee Reilly for helping to make this happen!



SANDBLASTED

Morgan Charère (she/they), Zuhairah, and Jessica Johnson (she/they). Photo by John C. Hawthorne

In true Theatre Horizon style, *sandblasted* took a heavy subject—the impact of racism on Black women’s bodies—and presented it in a way that was digestible, provocative, and surprisingly funny. Charly Evon Simpson’s take on Samuel Beckett landed strongly with theatergoers who love the absurd and people concerned for the plight of Black women in America. We watched Angela and Odessa follow celebrity guru Adah through the desert in search of a cure for their ailment before they literally fell apart.

Audience members were deeply moved by this piece and we consistently heard from patrons how the show made them feel seen on stage. People wanted to go deeper into the themes of the show: engaging with the lobby display and dramaturgy created by Sunflower B. Rose, our Education Coordinator and Associate Director for the play, celebrating friendship and sisterhood at our Open Mic hosted by Jalene Clark Owens,

and participating in talkbacks about racial disparities in healthcare. And **112 audience members were first-time ticket buyers to Theatre Horizon!** *sandblasted* received a



Zuhairah and Jessica Johnson (she/they), Prosthetic Design by Jo Vito Ramírez (they/them). Photo by John C. Hawthorne

Barrymore recommendation, and Krista Marr of the *Broad Street Review* called the show “refreshingly original, darkly comedic, absurd and hopeful” and praised everything from scenic design to direction and dramaturgy.

OUR EDUCATION PROGRAMS



After School Drama Clubs

This year, Theatre Horizon offered 10 after school Drama Clubs at elementary schools and Parks & Recreation centers throughout Montgomery County. In these clubs, students worked as an ensemble to rehearse and perform a 30-minute scripted play. Students met once a week after school and participated in theatre games, improvisation activities, and rehearsals. They came away with an increased sense of confidence, teamwork, respect, and understanding of theater techniques.

Impact

- **132 Classes** (*Eight 15-week clubs and two 6-week clubs*)
- **170 Participating Students**
- **30 Teaching Artists Employed**

were created by the campers. Professional teaching artists guided campers through playwriting basics and fun improvisation games. On the last day of each session, campers performed their world premiere play for an audience of friends and family. In Drama Camp, children made new friends, built listening and ensemble skills, took on leadership roles, and explored their creativity.

We are proud to share that over the past 15 years, we have enrolled 4,866 students across Norristown and surrounding Montgomery County. This past summer, we increased our attendance by more than 20 students, with 16 TAs serving 403 students total across 12 locations in Montgomery County. These were the most well-attended Summer Drama Camps in Theatre Horizon's history.

Impact

- **26 Camp Sessions** (*at 12 locations across Montgomery County*)
- **403 Participating Students**
- **15 Teaching Artists Employed**

Summer Drama Camps

In our annual Summer Drama Camps, young actors spent a week working as an ensemble to create an original play. Everything from the setting to the plot to the characters

Norristown Supplemental Theatre Education Partnerships (NSTEP)

NSTEP offers ongoing free theatre arts education programs in collaboration with our renowned community partners, including the Norristown Area School District, GirlsFirst, ACLAMO Family Centers, and now the Literacy Council of Norristown (LCN). Through NSTEP, Theatre Horizon works to enrich the cultural life of Norristown by producing quality theatrical experiences and programs accessible to community members of all ages.

NSTEP is a unique opportunity that allows us to meet the community at their needs and desires through flexible programming. In the 2022/23 season, we were able to: host an improv comedy club; devise an original middle school musical; develop a creative writing course that focused on job skills; and bring stories to life, from “Sweat”

by Zora Neal Hurston with high schoolers to “The Three Little Pigs” with our preschool students.

In the summer of 2022, we served our community with our second year of NSTEP Summer Drama Camp, welcoming 17 campers for a week at Theatre Horizon. The camp proved meaningful for our students, especially after spending so much time in isolation during the pandemic. In conversation with our staff, one parent had this to say: ***“[My son] had such a great experience at NSTEP summer camp, and it has motivated him to want to pursue more programs with Theatre Horizon. He can’t wait to be back in drama camp next summer! ... Without the scholarship, he would not have been able to attend summer camp, so our family is grateful for this opportunity.”***

NSTEP By the Numbers

- 6 Partnering Organizations
- 138 Participating Students



Students from NAHS with cast members of Head Over Heels at our first student matinee.

Autism Drama Program

Now in its 18th year, Theatre Horizon's award-winning **Autism Drama Program (ADP)** inspires imagination, communication, and creative expression for individuals on the autism spectrum. Offering classes both in-person and online, ADP helps our students develop confidence in themselves and a sense of connection with each other.

In January, Artistic Director Nell Bang-Jensen and Director of Community Investment Mydera Taliah Robinson made their national television debuts on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*! Our Autism Drama Program was featured as part of *What I'm Liking*—a segment at the end of the show where she shouts out something that made her smile. Speaking



Nell Bang-Jensen and Mydera Taliah Robinson on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*!

about our award-winning program, Kelly Clarkson said, ***“Teaching a kid the skill of how to communicate how they feel on the inside is so invaluable...[Autism Drama Program] is such an incredible gift that you’re giving and such an incredible opportunity, too.”***

This year, our Autism Drama Program expanded both its course offerings and partnerships, leading to record enrollments. Several of our Autism Drama Program students who participated in our production of *TOWN* were eager to continue their

acting activities with Theatre Horizon. Along with offering Youth Drama and Storytelling & the Art of Playwriting, we introduced a new Acting 101 course for students 13 and older. In this class, participants learned the fundamentals of Acting as they developed the skills necessary to communicate their character's intentions, thoughts, and feelings. Through improv, theater games, and acting exercises, participants learned to create strong characters, engage in rich dialogue, and the basics of performing for an audience. The class culminated in a final showcase where participants showcased the acting skills they developed throughout the course for family and friends.

Word is spreading quickly about our renowned Autism Drama Program! This spring, we were approached by A Step Up Academy—a school for students with autism—to see if we'd be open to bringing ADP into their classrooms. We were thrilled to make this new partnership and take our curriculum on the road. Leading “Theatre Group,” our teaching artists worked with thirteen students twice a week over the course of two eight-week sessions, introducing students to the fundamentals of theatre, expression, and creative play. We look forward to continuing this partnership and expanding the reach of our programming.

Impact

- **74 Classes** (Three 6-week sessions of 2-3 classes, one 1-day workshop, and two sessions at A Step Up Academy with 16 classes each)
- **76 Participating Students** (34 virtual learners; 42 in-person learners)
- **27 Teaching Artists Contracted**

The Albert M. Greenfield Philadelphia Teaching Artist Initiative (PTAI)

This past season, Theatre Horizon's education department embarked on an industry-altering, grant-funded initiative. In collaboration with Philadelphia Young Playwrights and the Wilma Theater, we received a grant from The Albert M. Greenfield Foundation for \$300,000 to fund a three-year collaboration: The Albert M. Greenfield Philadelphia Teaching Artist Institute (PTAI).



Teaching artists with Dr. Meagan Corrado of Storiez Trauma Narratives after our first PTAI training

Our education department serves students not only in Norristown but also in schools and summer programs all over the region. To make this possible, we contract teaching artists each year to be in the classrooms and inspire the future generation of theatre artists and arts supporters. However, balancing teaching artist growth, retention, and diversity with our budget, time, and schedule constraints has long been a

challenge. We discovered that this is an issue not only for us but also for several other theaters in the area. How can we ensure that our students benefit from high-quality, passionate teaching artists? How can we ensure that our teaching artists live sustainable lives and therefore continue with this work where there are wonderful rewards but also very real challenges? And how can we ensure that our teaching artists reflect the diversity of the students that they serve?

This past October, we kicked off our first official training for Teaching Artists. Students engaged in theory-based training, concrete application, and facilitated community-building conversations through a trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive lens. Post-training surveys were overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of respondents saying they would recommend the training to a friend or colleague.

It is our hope that by pooling resources and fostering a region-wide culture of cooperation rather than competition, our teaching artists and, ultimately our students are the major beneficiaries. We can spend less, work faster, and do more. In the near future, we hope to present this to other cities and regions as a model for solving many of the major issues that theatre education departments currently face.

October Training By the Numbers:

- 25 participants
- 19 TAs and 6 Education administrators
- 4 sessions
- 10 hours of training

OUR FUTURE IS TIED TO OUR COMMUNITY

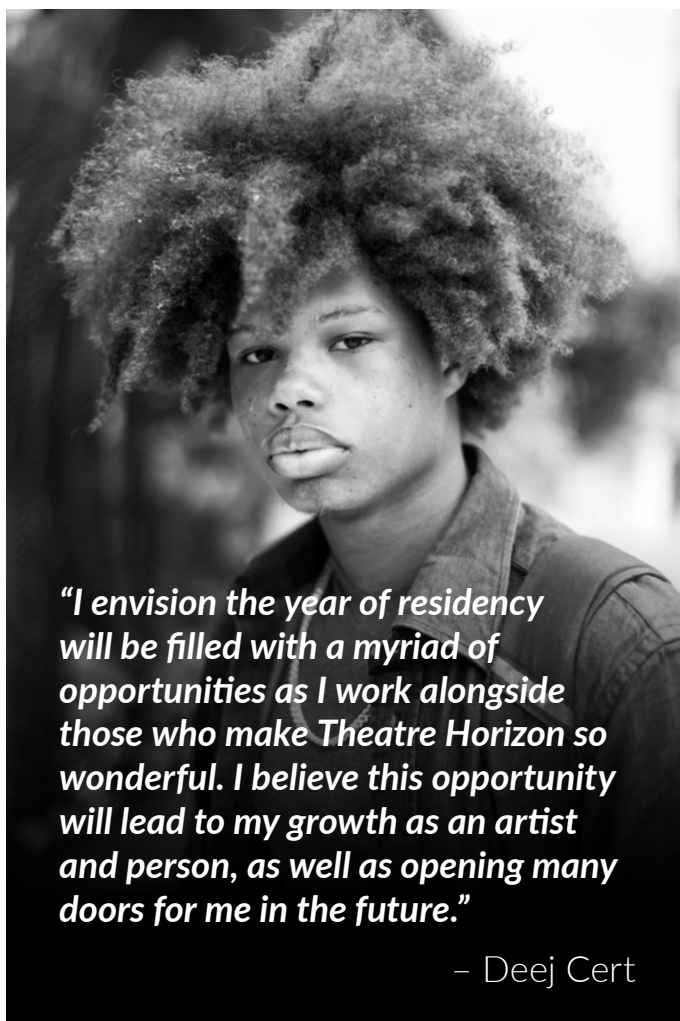


THREAD recipient Dion Jackson (he/him) with family and friends at the 2023 Juneteenth Jubilee Street Festival in Norristown

THREAD

Our first-ever residency program, Theatre Horizon Residency for Educational Artistic Development (*THREAD*), has been established to support the creation, development, production, and presentation of a BIPOC Norristown-based artist of any discipline. The residency program offers financial resources, space, time, and feedback on new or continuing artist work and also provides networking, teaching, and exhibition opportunities. At the same time, *THREAD* promotes interest, awareness, and understanding of creative arts and their impact in communities like Norristown.

THREAD aims to strengthen the fibers that bind, bridge, and build the emergence and retention of local talent. We support the overarching objective of making Norristown a leader in our region's arts ecosystem, making Norristown a destination for prospective artists, and amplifying the work of artists of color from within the Norristown community. From conversations with community stakeholders, we have learned there is currently a gap in residency opportunities and professional development for Norristown-raised and/or -based artists.



This April, we received 17 applications from a talented pool of diverse Norristown artists. A panel composed of our Community Advisory Board and members of our Board of Directors met to review applications and select our first *THREAD* resident. After careful review, Dion Jackson, a high school student at Norristown Area High School, also known as DeeJ Cert, was chosen. All of our impressive applicants were honored at an event at the theatre, and each received a gift card to support their artistic endeavors provided by a generous board member.

Through a generous grant provided by the TD Bank Charitable Foundation, Dion will receive a \$3,000 cash prize; access to Theatre Horizon's physical and virtual spaces; and Marketing,

Fundraising, and/or Artistic consultations from Theatre Horizon staff. The residency will culminate in a public event to showcase the artistic talents that exist within our Norristown community at the end of the 2023/24 Season.

Norristown Family Literacy Night

This year, we have continued to have a presence at community spaces and events in Norristown. Our partnership fostered during the creation of *TOWN* with the Norristown Public Library and a new partnership with the Norristown Literacy Council and One Book One Norristown led to a theatrical literacy event at the library. Students read a magical book and played theatre games that helped bring the story to life.



Theatre Horizon teaching artists lead a game with students at Norristown Public Library

Juneteenth

Theatre Horizon also had the opportunity to sponsor Norristown's Juneteenth Jubilee. In addition to providing staff support for the artists and vendors along DeKalb Street, we opened our space up for attendees to use the restrooms and escape the heat. As one of the artistic sponsors of the event, we turned our lobby into an art gallery and displayed the winning artwork and poetry of Montgomery County students who entered the Art & Prose of Freedom Contest ran by the county. The Juneteenth Jubilee also served as the kickoff of Dion Jackson's year as our 2023/24 THREAD artist. Jackson sat at the official Theatre Horizon booth during the street festival and was able to sell his artwork to the festival attendees.

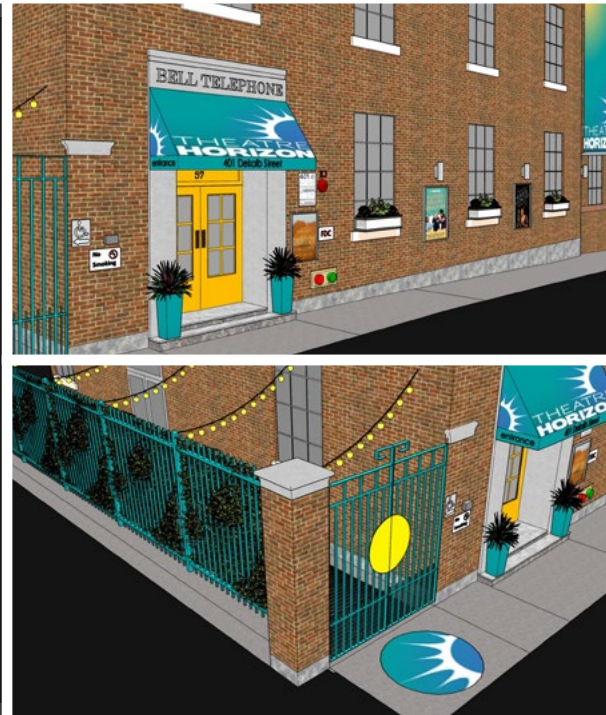
MLK Day with RUNegades

Theatre Horizon staff was honored to gather again this year with the folks at RUNegades on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Participants gathered in the Theatre Horizon lobby for coffee and breakfast treats provided by our neighbor, Good Vibz Café, before heading out on a route that led us to Martin Luther King, Jr. Park for a cleanup event. This year, Director of Community Investment, Mydera Taliah Robinson, challenged RUNegades Development Director Amon Gibson to share a poem with us all to kick off the event. Amon met the challenge and inspired us with his words before we headed out on a route through Norristown to the Park. After the cleanup, the crowd gathered at Good Vibz Cafe on Main Street for some well-deserved nourishment.



Theatre Horizon Staff & Board members with RUNegades leadership on MLK Day

RE:IMAGINING RECOVERY



Plans for new look at Theatre Horizon, Design by Chris Haig (he/him)

In September 2021, Theatre Horizon received a Re:Imagining Recovery from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage towards our work in becoming a “Third Space.” In a critical and forward-thinking move, The Center focused on helping cultural organizations like Theatre Horizon “undertake critical adaptations as they emerge from the effects of the pandemic—bringing new perspectives on how the arts can be revitalized and play a key role in the resurgence of the region’s civic and economic vitality.”

This work is being carried out through:

- Our Community Advisory Board (CAB), comprised of 14 BIPOC Norristown residents that reflect our community across race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. After meeting with Artistic Director Nell Bang-Jensen and Antiracist Facilitator Nicole Brewer, CAB presented recommendations on changes Theatre Horizon can make to better serve Norristown, including: a residency for Norristown-based artists (now *THREAD*);

increased lighting and visibility leading towards our entrance; access to clean, filtered water; a mural in our lobby that identifies our staff and board; and making our accessible entrance more welcoming. We actively listened to our CAB’s recommendations and welcome you to take note of these changes as you join us in Norristown in the coming season!

- Virtual experiments and technology upgrades led by Virtual Access Consultant Jared Mezzocchi. This past season, we began live streaming post-show talkbacks via YouTube so audiences in-person and online can participate and ask questions related to our productions.

We look forward to completing these updates by October 2023.



“Becoming a Third Space” has been supported by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

ANTIRACISM ACTION PLAN

On September 30, 2020, Theatre Horizon published our Antiracism Action Plan: a living, breathing document that will be edited and expanded over time as we continue to learn how the implementation of antiracist initiatives resonates within our organization and community. Our goal is to ensure ongoing commitment to the evolving conversation surrounding equity, inclusion, and access.

Below are a few highlights from our 2-Year Progress Report:

- Theatre Horizon staff participated in three training sessions with the group oneTILT. Topics included: inclusive leadership and management styles; disrupting and dismantling white supremacy culture in the workplace; and re-imagining our relationship to giving and receiving feedback through a lens of antiracism.
- oneTILT served as Theatre Horizon's DEI Consultants this past season, working with staff to create and implement new anti-oppression strategies.
- Our Antiracism Action Committee still meets regularly to move our existing plan forward and to plan our FY24-26 Antiracism Action Plan.
- Going beyond the words of our land acknowledgment, we deepened our partnership with the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania through our collaboration on their Rising Nation River Journey and TOWN,

Theatre Horizon's new play that featured the Lenape language. The entire cast participated in a Lenape language lesson with elders from the Lenape Culture Center to help become culture-bearers for this endangered language.

- On an as-needed basis, we provided childcare and transportation stipends for actors and creative team members for TOWN and plan to continue offering these stipends moving forward.
- We formed our first-ever Community Advisory Board of 14 Norristown residents—all identifying as Global Majority—to inform our long-term planning through facilitated conversations with Nicole Brewer of Anti-Racist Theatre.
- Using the Antiracism Action Plan as a core foundation, we created our FY23-25 Strategic Plan in collaboration with Board members, staff, Norristown residents, and artists.

Note: At the time of the plan's publication (September 30, 2020), 12% of Theatre Horizon's Board Members identified as BIPOC and 29% of Theatre Horizon's staff identified as BIPOC. As of the 2-year update (November 30, 2022), 31% of Theatre Horizon's Board Members identify as BIPOC and 38% of Theatre Horizon's staff identify as BIPOC.

In the Fall of 2023, we will release our Final Report, which will detail our future plans in intentionally carrying out this work.

OUR SUPPORTERS

FY23 Funds Raised

Individual Donors: **\$112,048**

Board of Directors: **\$79,074**

Corporate, Institutional/Government: **\$772,468**

Theatre Horizon could not thrive without support from individuals and institutions who believe in our work. We are proud to receive funding from local, national, private, corporate, and government grantmakers. For a full list of our individual donors, please visit theatrehorizon.org/our-supporters

Foundation and Government Support

Actors' Equity Foundation
The Albert M. Greenfield Foundation
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The Patricia Kind Family Foundation
PECO
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