

WAITING TO BE SEEN: A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF NEW YORK CITY ACTORS

Ashley Marinaccio

Give me somebody to dance for
Give me somebody to show.
Let me wake up in the morning to find
I have somewhere exciting to go.
To have something that I can believe in.
To have someone to be.
Use me, choose me, God, I'm a dancer,
A dancer dances!

Cassie, *A Chorus Line*

The 1975 musical hit *A Chorus Line* offers a fly-on-the-wall perspective on the lives of performers auditioning for a chorus job in a Broadway show. As each character exposes aspects of their aspirations and anxieties through song, dance, and monologues, we glimpse, and are led to empathise with the hardships and vulnerability associated with being a performer. Perhaps most revealing is the way in which each of these people wants—yearns—to *be seen*, to work, and, ultimately, to be validated in their chosen path. The actors represented in *A Chorus Line* are close to desperation in their desire to be given a chance to *have somebody to dance for*.

The themes in *A Chorus Line* resonate deeply with today's crop of actors and performers in New York City, pounding the pavement as generations of actors have before them, but now with additional hardships: skyrocketing rents, exorbitant costs of living, and the all-but-insurmountable debts from education and university training programs. For some, these pressures are too much: many young artists leave the business before their time, or never start at all.

Zachary Pincus Roth, writing in *Playbill*, cites employment figures attributed to Actors Equity Association (AEA), the American union for stage actors and performers. In 2007 the unemployment rate among members seeking work on Broadway hovered around 90% (Pincus-Roth 2007). What this figure does not capture is that it is often the same 10% of actors who continuously work: household names such as Patti LuPone, Idina Menzel, Nathan Lane and Hugh Jackman, to name a few. Further, such figures only represent union actors, not the majority of

actors and performers. For an actor to join AEA, s/he must be signed into an Equity contract offered by a producer or earn points through an Equity Membership Candidate program. Some actors are ineligible to join the union; others elect not to 'get their card' because major projects choose to stay non-union to avoid added costs: they book regular non-union work.

As Pincus-Roth explains, in 2007 there were 17,000 Equity members living in New York City and 46,000 nationwide. Out of that 17,000, only 2,070 of the Equity members living in New York City were employed in an Equity show of any sort, Broadway, Off-Broadway or otherwise (ibid.). Of the estimated 160,000 members across the United States, about 85% are unemployed; the 15% figure for employed actors includes minor roles and extra work.

At the same time, colleges and universities are producing more actors than ever (Weber 2005), and at great cost. In the United States a Bachelor's Degree or equivalent training program is generally considered a necessity for a career in theatre. To be considered for regional and classical theatres, an MFA (with costs that can add up to \$200,000) is highly recommended. The overall national student loan debt in 2013 was estimated to be US\$1.2 trillion and climbing (Chopra 2013). Finaid.org, a website that offers financial resources to students paying for college, estimates that the average American college student borrows between \$27,000 and \$114,000 to pay for college.¹

In a 2005 interview with the *New York Times*, Scott L. Steele, executive director of the US University/Resident Theater Association explained that

[w]e're producing too many people [...] many of them poorly trained or moved into the field without the connections or relationships necessary to make their transition to a career possible. It's as if medical school were graduating people without giving them internships at a hospital. (McMahon 2012)

Alan Eisenberg, executive director of Actors Equity, agreed: "[t]hese schools are just turning out so many grads for whom there is no work. How do we effectively prepare our students for a career that has no interest in them being part of it?" (in McMahon 2012).

In *American Theatre*, Diep Tran described the effect this has on graduates:

It is an unwritten truth of the field that not all graduates will have a full-time career in the arts. When the Indiana University's Strategic National Arts Alumni Project surveyed 7,093 theatre graduates between 2011 and 2013, 10 percent of respondents said they left the field because of debt; 26.9 percent left because of higher pay in other fields. And, out of 6,882 responses, 17

¹ This figure is no longer cited on the Finaid site. It is, however, referenced at a number of places. See, for example, Stokes and Wright 2010.

percent reported that debt had a major impact on their career or educational decisions. (Tran 2014).

How, then, do aspiring actors think about 'success' in a field where the odds of financially supporting oneself through their work are about the same as those of being struck by lightning? Given that we are so bombarded with images of successful actors, celebrity and media figures, perhaps it's a matter of 'someone has to 'make it': why not me?' What might 'making it' look like? Having regular work in theatre, film and television? Making enough money to pay the rent? Getting enough of a sense of affirmation to get up each day and try your hand? This photo essay explores the lives of four New York City-based actors attempting to make a living, if not to make a mark, as actors, tracking them through aspects of their day-to-day struggle to make it.

MEET THE ACTORS

What makes someone an 'actor'? Is it extensive training and studying with a renowned instructor at a university or intensive training program? Is it the ability to find the humanity in whatever role you are given? Is it the ability to play versatile roles? Or is it knowing how to brand, market and sell yourself in an industry that assigns you an identity and expects you to play within those confines? All this, plus the tenacity to keep going despite limited pay and respect from a society that values celebrity over artist.

The four actors presented here—Dominique Fishback, Tiff Roma, Brandon Contreras, and Ryan Victor Pierce—agreed to my documenting their lives and career aspirations. All four currently live in New York City and identify—indeed, define themselves—as actors. Some of them have additional identities in the arts including producer, director, Artistic Director and musician. The first observation is that to survive in the New York City theatre scene one must be adaptable and ready to work, sometimes in very short notice.

Dominique Fishback



Origin: Born and raised in Brooklyn, East New York.

Current Location: Lives in Brooklyn with mother and sister. "I do not have any side jobs. My mom works hard because she wants to see me follow my dream."

Education: BA Acting Pace University.

Debt: Six figures worth of debt for undergraduate degree from private university.

Favorite acting credits: Her theatre credits include original work with MCC Theater's Youth Company for five years, original

work with Girl Be Heard, a girl empowerment theatre group, that writes about the issues affecting girls all over the world with whom she has performed at the White House, Chicago Theater, TED Conferences and on tour in Dallas Los Angeles, London and Geneva. She has appeared on the TV shows *The Americans*, *The Knick* and *The Affair* and is currently filming a co-starring role in an HBO miniseries.

On discovering her passion:

I didn't grow up with theatre at all. I don't ever remember thinking about Broadway. The only acting I ever saw was on TV and I remember thinking I want to do that. I wanted to be like Tia and Tamara on *Sister, Sister* and the cast of *Full House*. Theatre wasn't something I was thinking about. I got into theatre because I was done waiting to get on TV and was ready to work. The first audition I ever did was for a Shakespearean play for teenagers. I knew nothing about Shakespeare: only *Romeo and Juliet*. I took the only monologue I knew and performed it to get into the show. I didn't get it but they called me and told me about a free program where I can learn more about acting and writing. That's how I got started.

Brandon Contreras

Origin: Born and Raised in New York City.

Current Location: Upper West Side, Manhattan.

Education: BFA in Musical Theatre from Pace University.

On making ends meet financially: "I freelance at an indoor cycling company and also work as a cater waiter to make financial ends meet. I do a lot of side jobs like babysitting and assistant work: under the table work. It's a struggle but I make it work."

On out-of-town work:

NYC will always be my home but I will travel anywhere and do whatever it takes to work. I was recently in Las Vegas doing an industrial—that's when a corporation pays you to act. We do a show and have characters and we do it for their conference. We signed a bunch of paperwork that couldn't release the name of the company. We couldn't take photos or talk about it. I worked with a lot of amazing people, some familiar faces. It was a musical theatre show. The principal was a famous actress in the theatre world. We all played characters in their world.

It was for the corporate heads of the organisation. One of my musical idols, Jason Robert Brown composed the music. I felt so honoured and humbled to be there, among such professionals. It was such validation to be the only person in that cast who had not been on Broadway yet. It was one of the most wonderful times I had ever had in the theatre.



Tiff Roma



Origin: Yonkers, NY.

Current Location: Harlem.

On making financial ends meet:

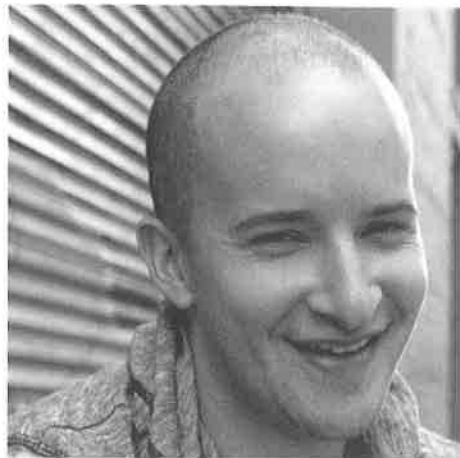
Currently I work as a full time Teaching Artist and Artistic Associate for a non-profit arts organisation. Some of my side jobs include go-go dancing, bar service, event planning and hosting, burlesque. I also do radio voice-overs. Even though I have a full time job I must work additional hours to make ends meet. I usually need about an extra \$200 per month to invest in myself, take dance classes, take acting classes and practice my craft.

Degree: BA in Theatrical Public Relations: a self-designed degree from the CUNY (City of New York) Interdisciplinary BA Program.

On health care: "I currently have health insurance through my father until next year. I don't have a plan for when my health insurance ends. I hope that I will be able to afford health care or that my job will pick it up."

On Paying Debt: “I only have \$6,000 in student loans that need to be paid off. I have about \$2,000 in credit card debt. I use my credit cards mostly to pay for master classes and for artistic needs. I pay on my credit cards but I keep incurring debt. I always pay more than my minimum.”

Ryan Victor Pierce



Origin: Born in New Jersey, Raised in Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Maryland.

Current Location: Chelsea, Manhattan.

Moved to New York City in 1997 to attend school at New York University.

Education: BFA in Theatre from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

On making financial ends meet:

I am a freelance court reporter and stenographer. I work weekends as a receptionist at a real estate office. With skyrocketing rent, student loan debt and the price of food and utility bills going up, it gets harder to make ends meet each year.

On identity:

I am a member of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape tribal nation. Our tribe resides in southern New Jersey and Delaware. My native heritage and identity informs who I am as a person and therefore who I am as an actor. The same ambiguity and ignorance that colours much of peoples' perception and knowledge of Native Americans translates into the work I receive as an artist. Casting directors don't know who I am and mistake me for other ethnicities. This can work to my benefit as I am versatile but there is nothing to ground me in any particular identity because my own national identity has been taken away. I have no home ... I mean, it's there but it's hidden. I have to dig deep to access it—which is one of the reasons I wanted to be an actor in the first place—to dig deep.

Favorite career moments:

My favorite roles have included *Tartuffe* and *Baal*. I have enjoyed working at The Public and New York Theatre Workshop, two well known off-Broadway institutions who have made it part of their mission to reach out to the diverse New York City Performing Arts Community.

On being discovered:

I understand 'being discovered' as meaning that you meet someone who helps you out. Some people go to expensive grad schools and it helps to connect them, some people find their type and do it well and other have to find their own way.

Career prospects:

I act and perform, but right now my focus is on creating my own work, launching my company and creating opportunities for people like me with my company The Eagle Project. The Eagle Project is a fiscally sponsored professional performing arts company that is dedicated to exploring the American identity through our Native American heritage.

THE ART OF SHOWING UP AND PREPARATION

Woody Allen is credited with observing that “80% of success is showing up.”² For actors this rings true; they cannot afford to not turn up. At the same time, they need to weigh what it is that they are showing up for against the time they could be spending doing something else. Chasing every job opportunity needs to be traded off against the labour of self-maintenance demanded by the profession. Each of the four actors in this essay have routines and habits, including working out, taking class, and meditation, all of which not only sustain their craft, but help to keep them feeling their best. They observe that constant rejection and lack of creative fulfillment often have strong negative effects on actors. Developing a daily routine and practice is imperative to staying physically and mentally fit for the industry.

TECHNIQUE



Ryan swipes his metro card to enter the subway at 23rd street in Manhattan on his early morning trip to the gym, something he does each day, and which he sees as integral to his artistic practice and preparation. Continuing to work on technique and craft is something he values and has worked on extensively both during and after his university training.

“Everyone's technique and preparation for an acting role,” he observes, “is different.”

Mine includes first and foremost figuring out what my character's objective is. What it is I want in the moment and show and how do I crystallise it into something visceral, specific and simple? Depending on how much time I have to prepare, I score actions on every piece of text as to what my character is doing using active verbs. Obviously motivations can and do change. I create lists of sensory inspirations to help me connect to the character. The gym is also an important part of my life ... it helps me to live in my own body.

² The best source for this is Marshall Blickman, co-author of *Annie Hall*, quoted in a 1977 interview in the *New York Times*. Blickman: “[a]s Woody says, ‘Showing up is 80% of life’” (Braudy 1977, 11).

CONSISTENCY



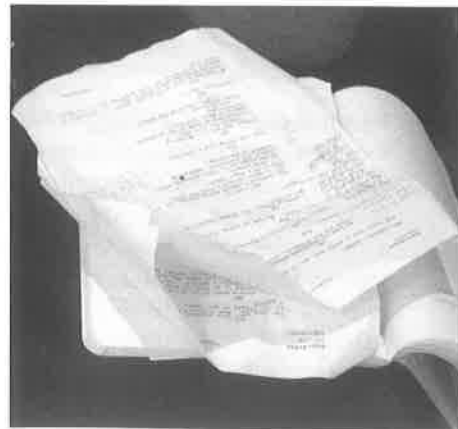
This morning Brandon is among hundreds of other New York City actors attending an open call for an off-Broadway musical adaptation of the novel/film *American Psycho* at Telsey and Company, one of the world's leading casting offices. Multiple auditions were held for several open roles, including for understudies. As is the case at most calls, actors who are not members of the union must wait until all of the Equity actors are seen. Often, for major projects, there is no time to see non-union members; hopefuls can wait up to six hours only to be told to go home.

I go to about two open calls per week. The *Les Misérables* revival that just happened on Broadway had people lined up at 4am. I didn't even get seen and I'm an Equity member. If the men's call is at 10am, I will generally get there at 7am. I got my Equity call through an open call. I booked the National Tour of *In the Heights*. I went to 11 auditions before I booked it. I was non-Equity at the time and was living in Maine. I took a bus from Maine at 2am and was seen after lunch: after 3pm. Then I jumped on a bus and headed back to Maine. I went to ten Equity open calls and got one callback. After the callback, I got the role. A lot of times it's not even the casting director behind the table; it's the assistant or intern. It's a toss up. Sometimes I don't even see the casting director for the show I'm cast in until the final audition. I wouldn't say open calls are truly pointless. It's our job as actors to audition. When you get the job, that's the perk, that's the gift. Some actors are blessed to go from job to job but some aren't as lucky.

PREPARATION

Dominique perfects a script for a television and film class. "When I am not filming," she tells me, "I take class. I always know there is room for improvement and want to be brushing up, learning new things."

I am on hold for the HBO [Home Box Office] miniseries I'm filming until the end of January. That means that if I have something scheduled on a day I am not supposed to film and they need me on set I have to cancel it immediately. One day they called me at 8:00am and told



me they were coming to pick me up to film in a few hours. They e-mailed me the updated script and I had to memorise the new lines while I was going to set. I always show up to set prepared and memorised. When you're shooting a TV show they tell you what scenes you're shooting each day. I came into the show completely memorised before we started shooting.

COMMUNITY

Brandon holds up the headshot of an actor friend for whom he is holding a spot for at the audition.

"She is my best friend. We take care of each other," he says. For many New York City actors taking care of one another includes taking turns getting in line at 5:00 am to hold spots for auditions and signing each other up to be seen by casting directors. "She will be here soon," he adds. "She had a callback for another show but wants to also be seen for this. She should be seen for this. She is brilliant."



MENTORSHIP

Tiff Roma works as a teaching artist. Here she is leading a theatre workshop that combines acting and writing exercises with feminist theory with the goal of empowering young women to write and perform stories that are important to them. "Being a teaching artist," she explains,

has definitely increased my leadership skills as a director and has made me more aware as an actor and artistic collaborator. I learn about myself through teaching other people, especially younger girls. When you're a teacher part of the job is to shed the weight of the day and create a new atmosphere. I reinforce my own ability to shed bad energy, to take care of myself and how my energy affects other people.

My schedule is so packed with my full time job that I can only attend about one audition per month. The idea of having to go back into serving and



waitressing full time where my day-to-day job has no artistic component is depressing to me. Only be seeing once per month is not the ideal actor life I'd like to have. I'd like to have four auditions per week. I don't want to go on auditions that I know will make me be fired or quit my job. I'm at a weird place in my career where it's easier for me to explore the roles as director and producer and continue living in the burlesque and cabaret world (because it's evening) as opposed to doing daytime auditions. It satisfies the performer in me but at the same time I still really crave being directed and wanting a good script that I can dive in and focus on. I feel like I always have to focus on 10 things at a time to keep the workflow going.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

In an article offering advice to actors, journalist Michael Simkins observed that

[a]cting isn't all about feeling the character and being in the moment. If you can't get a job, it's not about much at all. Acting is only possible if somebody's prepared to sit and watch you do it. To survive emotionally and professionally, you've got to both earn a living and nourish your beleaguered self-esteem. (2009)

Each of the actors to whom I spoke have found ways to keep themselves employed either by acting in self-produced projects or working on television, film and theatre roles that they have booked through agents and representation.

IDENTITY



Ryan Victor Pierce discusses production elements with playwright William S. Yellow Robe Jr. at The Eagle Project's inaugural production of *Wood Bones*. On the subject of creating his own work, Ryan says:

I am here to make meaningful work and I don't always want to be at the mercy of someone else in terms of getting my artistic fulfillment. I don't feel like that's the best way to make the impact and the work I want to do. Creating my own work gives a much better sense of destiny. There isn't much Native American work in the canon of the

stories that are out there. There is not much precedence for what I'm doing which is why I'm doing it.

INTIMIDATION

Tiff sleeps in the lobby of the Chicago O'Hare Airport while waiting for a connecting flight to New York City. She is en route back from Portland, Oregon after a tour with *Girl Be Heard*, in which she led teaching artist workshops and performed original work she has written with company members on homelessness and poverty.



It's hard to feel successful when I am around people who to me are more successful than I am and I consistently go back in forth in my head about whether or not I'm as good as I should be. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by all the things I'm doing and I think that if I was only focusing on one thing I may be more successful at it. I find myself asking, do these things even matter? So what if 100 people saw it; how many people are in the world? Does it matter to them? Everything I do I learn and grow from. When it comes time to put all my energy into one project I hope I'll have all these skills I need to really apply myself.

PATIENCE

Brandon waits patiently to be seen for his audition.

I went to the open call first and told my agent I was interested in the project and then they submitted me. When your agent submits you—they are just banking on a picture but when you attend the open call—the casting director gets to see you live.

I went in for *Aladdin* on Broadway recently. I went to the EPA [Equity Principal open call] a while ago and sang for the casting director: he was [actually] there. Last week I went in for a private appointment. My agent will let me know if they want to see me again. With Disney auditions the casting director will see you first and then send you along to the creative team. I had auditioned for Disney before, for *The Lion King*. There were only three of us in there for a possible replacement for Simba (the lead). They seemed to love me but I didn't advance.



PUBLICITY



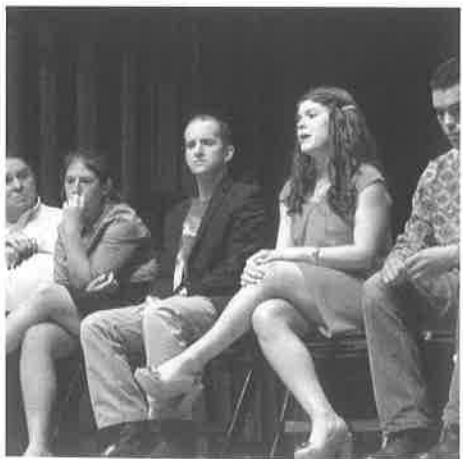
Dominique holds up the program from her one-woman show, *Subverted*. This program is used as part of her publicity materials and portfolio when meeting with potential agents, managers and casting directors. "I always bring a packet of articles, headshots, resumés, a portfolio that I bring to meetings," she explains. "Sometimes it includes writing and I perform spoken word poetry. It gives us a lot to talk about."

I got my agent through word of mouth: a recommendation from a friend who is signed with the same agent. I met them

in Los Angeles but signed with the New York office. At first I signed with the commercial department and they set me up with a meeting for the legit (TV, film, theatre) department. We have a great relationship. She is a mentor, friend and has come with me to do promo work for my HBO miniseries. We talk on the phone for 20 minutes. It's something usually managers do, but my agent has been good to me.

PROMOTION

Ryan speaks as a panelist following a reading produced by Eagle Project and the New York University Law School. The panel featured Native American performers, writers and artistic directors discussing the challenges indigenous people face in the entertainment industry. Each of the panelists represented a different nation.



There was a company in New York about ten years ago called the Australian Aboriginal Theatre Initiative and I worked with them for five or six years. The work that I did with them as an actor hugely informed who I am today and exposed me to indigenous plays from Australia and around the world. As a Native American I hadn't seen much of anything like that. We worked alongside indigenous performers from the United States and Australia in that process and it had a lot to do with informing me of the work and spirit out there. At that point I hadn't been

exposed to an American counterpoint like that. The Artistic Director received federal funding from Australia to bring the work here. That kind of support does not exist here in the States. The American indigenous people were

shocked at the support the Australian government offered the company. I want to create an intertribal and multicultural arts organization that uses Native American stories as the center piece, which is a more inclusive way of getting our stories out there and showing our society that issues in the indigenous community are relevant and affect everyone.

REHEARSAL

Ryan rehearses his role in *Wood Bones* by William S. Yellow Robe Jr. under the direction of Bob Jaffe at the Abingdon Theater in midtown Manhattan. The show's budget was around US\$20,000, which included paying all of the actors and artistic personnel a stipend. Ryan raised the funds himself through grants and private donors.



We selected *Wood Bones* as our first play because the brilliance of the play *Wood Bones* is that it's a very native piece but it's so contemporary that for most people; it wouldn't be thought of as a very native piece. It's a multicultural play that speaks to our American identity and it's universal in a way of how we treat one another and the environment around us. Bill (the playwright) is one of the most well known Native American playwrights of our time.

PERFORMANCE

"What does it mean to be an actor in this day and age?" wonders Ryan.

Well, for me when you come from a tribe of about 2,000 people that nobody really knows, it's given me no other choice but to do this work and to make my own work; because there is no template for my type or my story in show business or in our society.

Ryan performs several roles in Eagle Project's production of *Wood Bones*, including a Native American construction worker and racist Caucasian police officer.

I have been told that casting directors don't know what to do with me. I look too ambiguous and do not fit into a specific archetype for what is usually



cast. I have had casting directors say that they love my work but don't know what to do with me because of the way I look. It makes you fight tooth and nail for every audition I get . . . which isn't much. In my case, most times, I haven't even gotten the chance to audition for projects so I have no choice but to create my own work.



I had a casting director tell me once that if there was one way to do this career everyone would do it. My experience is success happens one of three ways—you either know somebody that gets you in the door; you have a good “look” that someone feels they can make a lot of money off of or you blaze your own way . . . and that's what I'm doing. The traditional route—submitting headshots and resumes on casting services like Actors Access, Backstage and waiting in line at Equity Open Calls—may work for some people but it certainly hasn't worked for me.

Dominique performs in a production of her one-woman show *Subverted* at Theatre 54 in midtown Manhattan. *Subverted* portrays the destruction of Black identity as seen through the eyes of Eden, an 18-year-old girl living in any urban city in the USA. Dominique plays 22 characters that explore what racial identity and equality really look like in America.

I'm working on taking my one-woman show *Subverted* to the next level: going through the editing process and seeing where I can perform it next in New York City. Ultimately, I'd love to do it on Broadway. I've been trying to get investors and sponsors. My agent is helping me with *Subverted*. We meet weekly to look at grants, contacting directors and seeing musical acts that could push it to the next level.

Tiff performs original work on homelessness and poverty with Girl Be Heard, a theatre company that brings global issues affecting women center stage by empowering young women to write and perform their own work. Tiff was part of an ensemble that toured Portland, Oregon and collaborated with local organizations to tackle the issue of homelessness through theatre.



For me, success means getting to support my lifestyle doing things I love. My ultimate career goal is to star in a feature film. I want to continue growing in my craft and land good parts while learning about myself and the world. Performing is what feeds me spiritually and inspires me. The beauty of working, collaborating with people and creating art is worth it. The success makes the struggles worth it. I couldn't see myself not being an artist. The idea of not creating art equals depression to me. It's the reason I get up in the morning. It's the reason why I read and study. The whole lens that I look at the world is inspiration for creation. Every time I create I learn and grow and it's what I always want to do. I always want to connect with people in a real way.

THE FINAL BOW AND LOOKING AHEAD

For the actors documented in this essay, the bow is never final. Each of them juggle multiple sources of outside income and creative projects allowing them to work on their craft. Each of these actors also set goals for themselves and have created a close network of supporters that include family, friends, collaborators and professional management. “Dreams do come true,” says Brandon. “I was a junior in college when I booked the National Tour of *In The Heights*. I saw it on the Tony Awards and turned to my sister and said ‘I will be in that show one day’. I believe if you put your heart into it the Universe will answer in some way.”



Dominique checks her phone backstage at *Subverted*, finalizing the guest list and making sure that all expected industry members have seats reserved for the performance.

The most fulfilling moment so far has been booking my first miniseries for HBO called *Show Me A Hero*. I booked it immediately, after my first audition with my agent. It usually doesn't happen like that and I feel very blessed. I am working with people from *The Wire* and other HBO classic series. It's well written and my character has a fascinating arch. I do some stunt work, I work with children, I get to be in love, have my heart broken: the work is so versatile. I feel so close to this character because I know so many people like her and I understand her.

Ryan performs alongside a large ensemble of over 20 actors in The Remembrance Project: Trail of Tears, an ensemble devised theatre piece at Nuyorican Poets Café co-produced by The Eagle Project. *The Trail of Tears* is an original theatrical event where



a contemporary Native American family is the key that unlocks the door to one of the most hidden and horrific events in American and human history, the genocide and attempted forced removal of all Native tribes east of the Mississippi River. Through poetry, personal testimony, music, and movement, the impact of this gruesome event on the American psyche. Currently, The Eagle Project is expanding the Trail of Tears workshop into a full production both in New York and Washington, DC.

One of the most fulfilling moments of my career so far was *The Trail of Tears* Workshop we did at the Nuyorican Poets Café last year in collaboration with another theatre company called Rebel Group. It took a horrific historic American event and made it contemporary, relevant, diverse and dynamic. It made this event part of the American lexicon in a way that I had never experienced. I also got to perform some of my own writing—and tell my own story—which was very fulfilling. It gave me the platform to confront, discover and express things within myself that I had never before been given the opportunity to do.

Tiff rehearses for Girl Be Heard's newest ensemble devised piece, *Displaced*, which was written in collaboration with multi-national asylum seekers from the Sandholm Refugee Camp in Denmark. *Displaced*, created by the Girl Be Heard company members, puts a face on displacement, homelessness and the consequences of conflict in the USA and abroad.



This project is artistically fulfilling because I got to meet and work with the women in the refugee camps and am honored to use my voice to connect people across the globe. It reinforces my understanding that we're all the same all that separates us is circumstance. The most fulfilling moment so far in my career was when I was on stage on my 22nd birthday in New York City and it was sold out. There were 120 people there. I felt like I knew I could do 'this'. That I am an artist and people want to hear what I have to say and experience what I have to create. When I look back on it—all the things I've done—it appears that I'm successful . . . sometimes.

Readers can follow the careers of the actors profiled in this article and connect with through the internet and social media by visiting the following websites:

Brandon Contreras: https://twitter.com/ohhey_brandon

Dominique Fishback: <http://www.dominique-fishback.com>

Ryan Victor Pierce: <http://www.eagleprojectarts.org>

Tiff Roma: <http://girlbeheard.org/portfolio/tiff/>

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