



# THE NEW YORKER

## JEREMY O. HARRIS ON SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN THEATRE

By: Mary Alex Daniels

March 12th, 2021



By Gucci. Fall 2018 Menswear Collection

**Breaking Tony Award records,  
signing the “We See You WAT” Letter,  
& producing a TikTok musical.**



Andrew White for The New York Times

American theatre's most provocative new voice was catapulted on an express comet to Broadway, and has landed his 6 foot 5 frame in Gucci sneakers. His charisma is palpable, with energy his mentor and fellow playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney describes as, "a supernova star that consumes everything around them and metabolizes a new energy." His larger than life persona comes with a powerful message to the predominantly white spaces of American theatre. His Broadway debut ("Slave Play") broke Tony records, and his career focused on amplifying black voices and bodies on stage is just beginning.

While Jeremy O. Harris spent years in the theatre as an actor, his career truly gained traction at lightning speed when he began to write. Harris was in his 3rd year in Yale Drama School's playwriting program when his daring work, Slave Play, was picked up for an Off Broadway production at New York Theatre workshop in 2018. This past year the play went on to have a highly acclaimed Broadway run at The John Golden Theatre prior to the shutdown in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, in 2020, *Slave Play* has broken the record for Tony Award nominations for a new play, with 12 nominations in total at the iconic awards show. “I’m really excited that this gets to happen for a black queer person” Harris said, “because it’s creating a new conversation about how big we can imagine.”

Harris began his imaginative journey with theatre at a production of “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” in his hometown of Martinsville, Virginia. Experiencing the magical world of *Midsummer*, fit with fairies and lovers, was a formative experience for him as a young artist. His high school drama teacher back home in Virginia told him to read every Pulitzer Prize winning play if he wanted to learn about the history of theatre. He consumed every play available at his local book store, finding that most of them didn’t tell the BIPOC stories that he knew and wanted to tell. “Tall, lanky, queer, and black—in the small corner of the world where I was looking for plays, I didn’t find anything that looked enough like me,” he says of his southern upbringing. “It was like putting a square peg in a round hole. So I decided to build a square hole to put my peg into.” Said ‘square peg’ has been described as an antebellum fever dream that, “reimagines the possibilities of what theater can give us” (The New York Times). Harris has pushed the bounds of what has been presented on stage, and shines a light on the continued racism in America and within the theatre community. It seems that maybe the American Theatre is finally ready for a square peg.

Theatre as an art form has long been criticized for being elitist and Euro-centric, and Harris hopes to be one of the voices that steers theaters in a more inclusive and anti-racist direction. He has lots of bold ideas of how to change the theatre landscape for the better, forging equality for BIPOC artists. “I’m continuously asking people, Why is it that Alice Childress is not getting a revival on Broadway?” he says.

“Why is it that we’ve only had, like, one Adrienne Kennedy remount in the past five years, but in New York, we’ve had three by Edward Albee? Why is it that the works of so many experimental and genre-bending black artists don’t get taught in our schools? For me, part of being a young writer is talking about your references — consistently.” This ambition to bring more diversity to the theatre and arts education is long overdue, with many great BIPOC playwrights being overshadowed by the white “American Classics” such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Harris is determined to continue to speak up on what is considered 'classic' theatre. His ambition towards greater diversity in the theatre industry begins with advocating for underrepresented voices and stories that should be amplified more often on Broadway. These questions around diversity and Broadway have been echoed by many theatre artists in the past year.



By Matthew Leifhelt

A few months after *Slave Play* completed its run on Broadway, the BLM Movement was gaining traction across the nation after the murder of George Floyd. Organizations who were traditionally considered allies suddenly had to reevaluate their values and actions. Theater companies were not left out of this movement. In the summer of 2020, a group of BIPOC theatre artists posted a list of demands entitled, “We see you White American Theatre” or “We see you WAT”. What started with a conversation between 3 theatre makers concerned about the devaluation of and violence against Black bodies in the world, grew into a well constructed and thought out list of demands for theatre companies to address racist and inequitable histories, and take steps to becoming anti-racist institutions.

Harris was among hundreds of notable BIPOC artists (Suzan Lori Parks and David Henry Hwang, for example) who signed the list of demands. Just in the 24 hours after its posting, the “We See You WAT” letter received 80,000 unique visitors and 50,000 signatories have signed a petition demanding substantive change in the American theater— that number continues to grow by the minute.

Harris discussed how passionate he was about creating spaces for black bodies and other POC on American stages. He is determined to use his success and newfound platform to continue his activism for greater inclusivity in the theater. “In this landscape of white, cis, straightness, there’s a curiosity about this black queer boy working in this paradigm,” Harris says, “which is both interesting and scary because it feels like a trend. Like, what happens when they get bored?”

Harris claims that if and when they do get bored, he will persist in posing questions about race, gender, sexuality, and the interactions therein.



MICAIAH CARTER

But for now, he has big plans of how he can make a difference in the theatre industry, even from home.

He has taken part in gender-fluid campaigns for big brands such as Gucci, and been interviewed on talk shows such as Seth Meyers about changing the theatre landscape. He has most recently produced the TikTok musical: *Ratatouille*, which raised almost 2 million dollars for out of work theatre artists. Jeremy O. Harris has finally made it on a path that he is proud to continue to forge for himself and future BIPOC, queer, theatre artists. “The fact that I took so many wrong turns and have ended up here means that everything was sort of right,” Harris says. “If I can utilize the wrong turns I made, and bring along all the people I met along the way into my journey of being a playwright, and introduce them and their friends to people that I think are making the best theater right now, then theater might actually become a medium that people care about again.”

## Works Cited

- "Introducing Jeremy O. Harris: The Theater World's Vital New Voice."  
GQ, Condé Nast, Nov. 2018, [www.gq.com/story/introducing-jeremy-o-harris-the-theater-worlds-vital-new-voice-sponsor-content](http://www.gq.com/story/introducing-jeremy-o-harris-the-theater-worlds-vital-new-voice-sponsor-content). Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.
- Kumar, Naveen. "A Playwright Who Won't Let Anyone Off the Hook."  
New York Times, 28 Nov. 2018,  
[www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/theater/jeremy-o-harris-slave-play.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/theater/jeremy-o-harris-slave-play.html). Accessed 18 Jan. 2021.
- "Reviews." *Slave Play*, 2021, [slaveplaybroadway.com/reviews/](http://slaveplaybroadway.com/reviews/).  
Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.
- Street, Mikelle. "Meet Jeremy O. Harris: The Queer Black Savior the Theater World Needs." *Out*, 8 Nov. 2018, [www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/11/08/meet-jeremy-oharris-queer-black-savior-theater-world-needs](http://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/11/08/meet-jeremy-oharris-queer-black-savior-theater-world-needs). Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.
- "We See You, White American Theater." *We See You*,  
White American Theater, Jan. 2021, [www.weseeyouwat.com/](http://www.weseeyouwat.com/).  
Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

## Writer's Memo

1. I feel the strengths of my profile lie in how I utilize the quotes to paint a picture of who this person is, what their values are, and why they are important at this moment. Additionally, I give good context on important biographical points for readers who are not familiar with Harris.
2. The revisions I made laid primarily in the transitions between paragraphs to make them flow more logically. I reimagined the main points of the piece, and added more seamless flows between points. I received feedback from my peers to provide more context for readers that might not be familiar with Harris, so I incorporated some more contextual elements (such as background on past major works) as well.
3. I am concerned that I might not have a strong enough "angle" in the piece. I am wondering if I need to incorporate my voice more as a writer and a profiler.
4. I think I addressed my target profile well. The New Yorker includes a lot of pieces on the theatre, and I believe that my writing leaned to the side of professional (in line with the publication) rather than opinionated and brash.
5. I would like you to know that a lot of these quotes I have used are about a year or more old. I hope that through my writing, analysis, and focus of the profile, the quotes seem current to the issues facing the theatre industry and larger American artistic landscape. Thank you!