

*I wanted to use this cover letter as another opportunity for reflection, a chance to consider how this essay made me consider the world I'm entering on a deeper level. Writing about type casting compelled me to see past the glitz and nostalgia of Broadway and identify the actual people who exist beneath the curtain. As a result, I was forced to examine my own presumptions, instances in which I have accepted "tradition" without considering the people it excludes, and the ways that language, expectations, and appearance influence the paths that people are permitted to take.*

*While my audience is directly you, Professor Brain, truly it was written for current theatergoers of all demographics. It's written for the people that aren't afraid to question and challenge "the way things have always been". Using my own personal awareness helped me guide the tone through the essay and create a readable yet impactful essay.*

*This essay taught me that even in topics that feel heavy or overwhelming, there is room to step back and see how the conversation connects to real people, including myself. By grounding my argument in both research and lived experience, I feel like I've taken another step toward finding my own voice in academic writing. And just like watching Audrey Hepburn changed the way I saw myself in the LLN, this topic changed how I understand the power of representation, who gets it, who's denied it, and why that matters.*

## Mea Cleary

### Synthesis Essay

Type casting? What is it, and what harm does it really do? Type-casting, an age-old tradition in the theater industry, is defined as assigning an actor or actress a specific role based on how they look. In other words, stereotyping. Stereotyping and type-casting can take racist, fatphobic, and homophobic tones, and often do, leaving actors with serious mental health and even physical health issues. Actors are constantly exposed to blatant discrimination based on their size or the color of their skin, and more times than not, will be prevented from receiving the role of a lifetime, or even just a role that could keep food on the table, because the casting director may not like their features or the way they speak. Broadway has been typecasting from the beginning. From its start more than 200 years ago, only white, skinny people were



*Fanny Brice circa 1930's*

allowed to go to the theater, let alone perform. In order to perform, the actor, but more so the actresses, had to be white, skinny, and unnaturally beautiful. I mean, look at the golden standard for early theater, the Ziegfeld Follies. In the musical *Funny Girl*, a musical about an amazingly talented, wonderfully comical girl named Fanny Brice who ends up being a Ziegfeld

star, there is a song called, “If A Girl Isn’t Pretty”, a song sung to the main character, Fanny Brice, that even though she is a true star and can make everyone laugh, because she isn’t a pretty, leggy, skinny girl, she is told she will never get anywhere.

With lyrics like, “If a girl isn't pretty like a Miss

Atlantic City, all she gets from life is pity and a pat. Kindly name a star who hasn't won a contest or a pageant, if she hasn't, she just never gets to bat” and “Be a standard size that fits a standard dress. When a girl's incidentals are no bigger than two lentils, then to me, it doesn't spell success”. These lyrics blatantly call out the over sexualization and high beauty standards put on not only people in the theater, but more specifically, women. In theory, the whole plot of *Funny Girl* revolves around typecasting and the immediate effect it has on someone’s well-being. Fanny Brice did anything and everything she could to break from the bounds of how she looks, being, and pleasing for people to see her for the star that she is. Body shaming, unrealistic beauty standards, and systemic racism are not new things in the Broadway industry; although many try to take new, progressive steps, it often comes off as window dressing and feels very insincere to those repeatedly harmed by racial and weight-based stereotypes.

If A Girl Isn't Pretty Movie Clip  
<https://youtu.be/OSaraczoziE?si=bl7vioHloGvaiccZ>



*Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice in Funny Girl*

According to an AP News article, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a Puerto Rican composer and actor, launched a project called “A New Deal for Broadway” in 2021. This was negotiated between Black Theater United and Broadway and all of its touring shows to offer more accessibility to offstage jobs for people of color. 100% of general managers, 94% of producers, 80% of the leads in musicals, and 90% of the leads and plays are all white (AP News). This “New Deal” is great for offering those who have a passion for behind-the-scenes jobs, but it really does nothing to stand up against the harsh reality of type-casting. The only way the racist and fatphobic undertones of type-casting can be resolved is for casting agents to stop being racist and fatphobic. Bottom line. Now,



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many shows try to put on a front, wanting people to think that they are becoming more progressive, but that is clearly far from the case. Between the “must be heavysset” casting call and the “lose 15 pounds before rehearsal” clause in contracts, things are far from where they need to be. It should be the talent that books a job, not the number on the scale or what color stage make-up someone puts on.

In Ryan Donovan’s book, *Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity*, you read with horror

about how the actresses who play Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray* are subject to required

weigh-ins and are fed candy bars and milkshakes to “keep in shape” maintaining a plus sized body for Tracy, a plot point that the show not only is known for, but wouldn’t really make sense without. Although horrific and wrong, at least they are cast. It is a common and harsh reality that women over a certain weight will only ever be cast in roles that are written for bigger women, and only ever those roles, meaning if you want to be cast in a show, you either have to lose weight or fight for the very few roles that already exist for bigger women. Although easiest to notice amongst female representing roles, men struggle just the same. In an article for Howlround, author Jeff Bouthiette writes, “At one point in my career, I discovered ‘the number’—I’d lost weight, and I found out the exact number on the scale when I started getting called back consistently at larger houses” (Howlround Theater Commons, Bouthiette). This creates loads of mental and physical health problems. Women and men alike are forced into eating disorders and exhausting workout routines for the sake of living their dreams. Women on all ends of the weight spectrum are only trying to be “skinnier”, trying to be more versatile, more marketable, and until Broadway creates more roles more for more diverse bodies and/or casts all women in all roles, this problem will never cease.

On top of weight, there is the timeless racism. Rarely does a person of color ever get cast in a role that wasn’t originally written for a person of color. Latino and gay man Alex Vera talks about how he has always been cast as the criminal or the bank

robber, while his white best friend has always been the boy next door. He talks about how they will sing similar songs and audition for the same roles, yet he has never been given a chance to be the boy next door, the protagonist, or the love interest (Very, Rileigh, "Breaking Stereotypical Type Cast: Navigating the Effects of Type Casting as a Performing Artist", pg 17). From the start of American entertainment, you can see blatant racism. There were minstrel shows to laugh at and the Follies to aspire to be. Minstrel shows were America's true first form of entertainment. They consisted of racist caricatures based on black culture. Endless slurs and microaggressions



*Ziegfeld Follies*

stemmed from minstrel shows and created a stigma or stereotype of what was expected of black performers.

Meanwhile came the emergence of the

Ziegfeld Follies, pretty, skinny, white girls who would wear partially revealing costumes decked from head to toe in gems and pearls. These were the girls every girl wanted to look like, the ones to aspire to be. To be a Follie was to be the beauty standard. To be a Follie was to be white and skinny. While white men and women are typecast as the leading man or the wide-eyed ingenue, black people were typecast as their maids or butlers, black men even being compared to primates. Racial stereotypes of all people of color were the basis of early American theater, and people aren't letting it go. Call it "racist", call it "traditional", casting directors do what they think will make the most

money via appealing to the largest number of people. Rarely do we see a role originally played by a white person later cast with a person of color without it being a big spectacle. Take the two Annie movies, one made in 1982, one made in 2014. The 1982 version has a white girl playing Annie, while the 2014 version has a black girl playing Annie. Okay? So what? The story was the same, the songs were practically the same, the ending was the same, what's the big deal? People hold on to the word “tradition” like their lives depend on it. People were in an uproar about “black Annie”, claiming there is no reason to change a “classic”, which makes you wonder what they would have said if the same movie were remade in the same way at the same time, and the only different thing was the color of Annie’s skin.

There is a steady argument that typecasting and all of the stereotypes that come with it are just “showbiz”, that creating a space where everyone has equal opportunities to live out their dreams is a ridiculous fantasy, and the entertainment industry would crumble. Many say that typecasting often starts as a compliment, to make the actor feel like they have what it takes to be a part of the character (Typecasting: A Comprehensive Guide for Actors, Ilana Rapp). According to an article written to help actors navigate typecasting, actors should lean into it, make themselves more hireable. “Focusing on your Type(s) allows you to better serve casting directors and the audience because you're able to play those roles perfectly since you're good at them and they naturally suit you. This means you're able to perform them better than

any other actor – you're the best possible match for that character Type.” (Type Casting in Acting 2024... All You Need to Know, City Headshots). They say that your type is what will help you have your career take off and will help lead to a recognizable name for yourself in the industry, but what if this type isn't what you want your career to be based on? What if you don't want to be the criminal because you're Latina, or the maid because you're black, or Tracy Turnblad because you're bigger, or maybe you don't want to be stuck playing the wide-eyed ingenue with an “I want” song before act 1 closes and an overly-sexualized dance break because you are skinny and “pretty”? Just because it's the way things have always been doesn't mean they need to stay that way. However, while people fight to make a change, there is always the looming desire to achieve that dream, to finally be cast, and if that means leaning into your type, then for some, that is what will work for them.

Broadway can change, it just won't. Casting directors don't want to cast more people of color, or people over size 8...so then write more shows for them. As important as the casting directors and the show writers are to this change, the audience is just as, if not more, important. Sybil Davis brings light to the attempt Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* made towards being “progressive” and how that attempt ultimately feels rushed and more like a failure than a success. Davis says, “Throughout the play, characters talk of 'rising up' against oppressors. Of course, this takes on extra meaning given the largely Black and Latinx cast. Our heroes are

presented as members of an oppressed group who are revolting against tyranny. But they were fighting for a bourgeois version of liberty. Indeed, even Hamilton himself bought and sold slaves on behalf of his in-laws and managed an import business that engaged in the slave trade. All the facts about slavery and genocide are swept under the rug.” (Davis, 2020). While at the same time, we have musicals like *A Strange Loop*, which brings light to the struggles a man goes through being black, fat, and gay, and although giving it the space it deserves, it does not make that the whole character plot. Broadway is not what it used to be, and to quote *Wicked*, some of it has “changed for the better”, or at least it’s working on it, but audiences have to be ok with that. People have to be willing to see the shows that aren’t their grandmother’s Broadway because their grandmother’s Broadway was a racist and fatphobic Broadway. Money makes the world go around, and without enough people coming to see these progressive shows, no one will want to make them, leaving people stuck in the cycle of typecasting.

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