

As a young actor moving to Chicago I sought out an artistic home, a space to grow as an artist, and that objective transpired into becoming close with companies like Teatro Luna and Collaboraction. Whereas theaters such as TimeLine or yes, even American Theater Company for some reason, were not theaters on my radar nor places I often found myself in. And that is no fault of theirs, because it could have come down to something as simple as they didn't know who I was - and I didn't know their work or who they were, so I was not proactive in doing the research I needed to do, but also maybe, *maybe*, it came down to accessibility? Who knows.

Needless to say, I recall learning about PJ Paparelli, who I did not know, but he was the ATC Artistic Director who passed away. Shortly after, I learned that Bonnie Metzgar would be serving as the interim AD. Now, I had worked with Bonnie once on a production in the last Steppenwolf Garage Rep series, so I had an idea of Bonnie's work and I thought that was exciting news. One day I received an email from Bonnie and I was seriously so delighted, thrilled and surprised. This email inquired about my interest and availability to participate in a table read of a play *Men On Boats* by Jaclyn Backhaus with Will Davis who was going to direct it at ATC. However, this very Will Davis was going to be the official new Artistic Director of American Theater Company. Will was going to be one of the few Transgender leaders of a major artistic institution and that, *that* caught my attention and I didn't realize how important that was for me, as someone undergoing the peak of their own transition, until I was in the same room as Will.

And the rest, as they say, is history. After two table reads of *Men On Boats*, I was offered a role, which was a dream. I quickly learned that in the grand scheme of it all, I liked collaborative environments where we first and foremost brought ourselves, and then we were artists, and we were creators. Plus, I finally felt like I found someone who saw me in the light I wanted to be seen in, a light I was ready to be seen in. It seemed Will and I had similar creative ways of thinking and ways of working. I also cannot emphasize enough how taken care of, how valued and how seen I felt by Will and everyone else that made up ATC like Sarah Slight, Emma Palermo, Katie Klemme, Abhi Shrestha, Amanda Forman and Logan Jones. In a Northside theater I finally got to experience things, basic human needs, that many people take for granted. I wasn't tokenized, I didn't feel used as if to educate. I existed. And the ATC I was a part of and was proud to be a part of was queer as fuck but also, playful and freeing. ATC provided the roof and it was there where I had opportunities to do the thing I love in a way I suddenly was craving. And yes, I also must give a shout out to The Chicago Inclusion Project who also said, "we see you Avi, we see you."

Now, I recognize the arguments and thoughts around experimental queer theater not only happening at ATC because of Will but in fact existing all over the city of Chicago. And that is true.

I've also been seeing a lot of jargon, words and phrases being thrown around like *queer*, *experimental*, *not the norm* and *different*...And, well, I'm going to be very honest and share this thought that I've been sitting with and that is: every time I go in for an audition in the last 2 years...I get worried that the thought of me being Trans/Non-Binary and Latinx possibly works against me, because it's not the *norm*, I'm *different* and that the very essence of my being is too perplexing. And that it goes beyond not fitting a vision or being right for the part, that who I am and what I look like is a thing to consider in casting as to not anger or turn away a specific subscriber base. Therefore, the step is a baby step in making things more digestible for an audience, which means I may be given a chance to be seen, but won't be getting the part, and that doesn't feel so good. And perhaps that is ludicrous and an absurd thing for me to feel or

think. But bottom line to say I am *different*, I am too *weird*, I am not the *norm* hurts...but it's such a glorious feeling to know that the words "You're weird, you're so fucking weird!" were spoken a loud growing into exaltation in *We're Gonna Be Okay* and those were some of the last words to fill that space and beyond.

ATC under Will Davis became my true artistic home and now that has not only been taken away from me, but from many others who came to see Will's plays in this short amount of time and sat in that audience, thinking to themselves, "Wait, I can do this, I too can make art, be an actor, perform, tell stories, because there is a place for me...I'm not weird or different in a bad way, I do belong."

Representation does matter, and I will say that over and over again.

A few last things: I've never connected to a human being and artist and director before more than the way I did with Will Davis. I found my niche at ATC under Will's direction, leadership and vision and that's something I shall never forget. During *Men On Boats* and *We're Gonna Be Okay*, was when I learned what it meant to be an artist and actor, as Avi, and fully be able to bring myself to this acting stuff.

So now what? For now we have to move forward and onwards while we all continue to help carve paths into spaces that for many marginalized people, may feel distant, impossible or unattainable, or not worth it. Or yes, we continue to create our own things, be pioneers, DIY it, self-produce it, but whatever *it* is, we have to keep doing *it* and keep working hard.

The wave has begun and sure, the reality is that we may not see the full fledged changes that we wish to see in our lifetime, but this is a start, this is a start. And for now, I'm going to be positive and optimistic.

- Avi Roque, actor