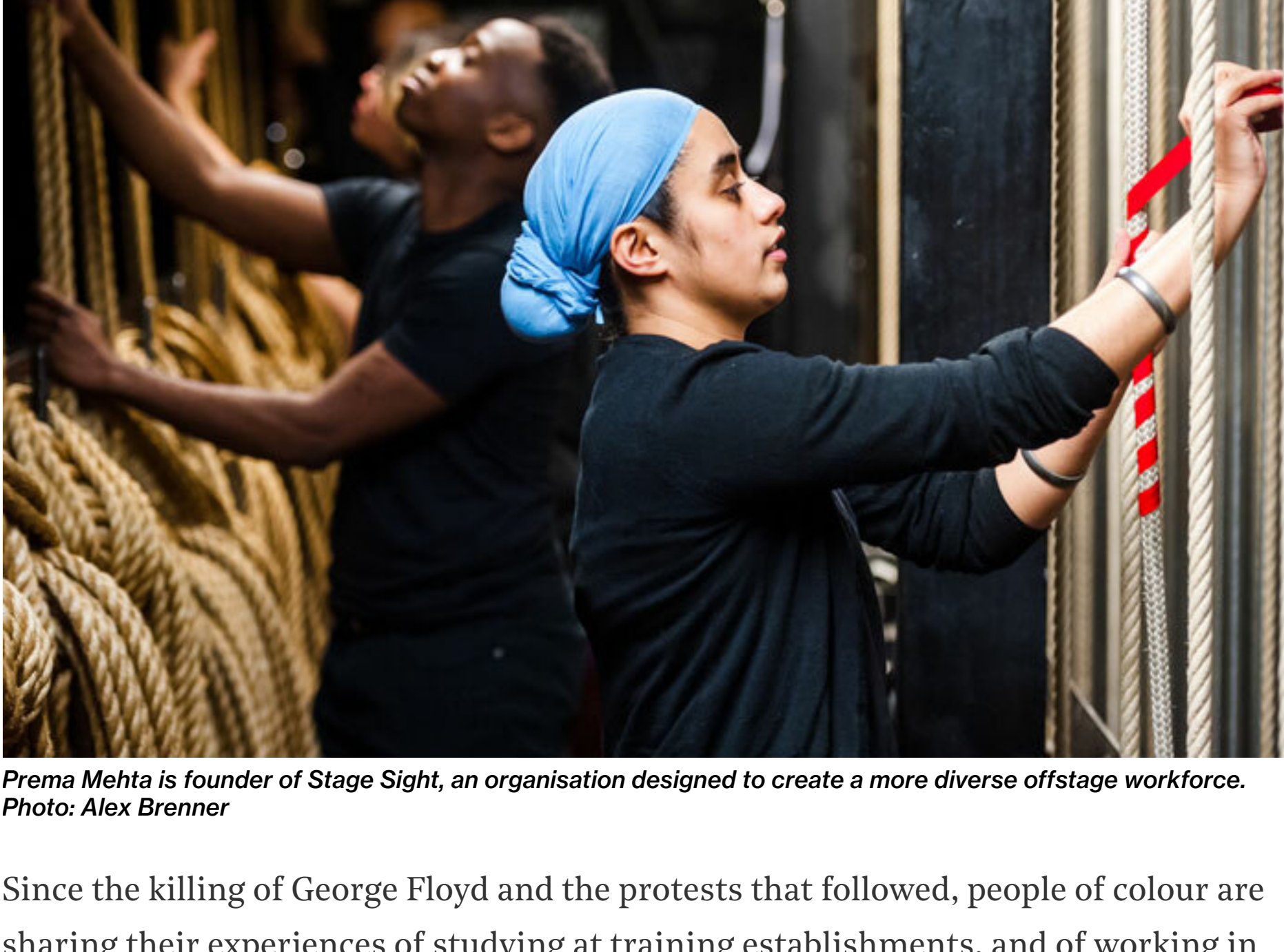


Change is coming, but we must work together

OPINION JUN 16, 2020 BY PREMA MEHTA

Following the global protests against racism, **Prema Mehta**, founder of Stage Sight, says it is not time that will heal the pain, but change. Those in positions of power need to step up to remove workplace barriers



Prema Mehta is founder of Stage Sight, an organisation designed to create a more diverse offstage workforce. Photo: Alex Brenner

Since the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed, people of colour are sharing their experiences of studying at training establishments, and of working in the industry. There is a common, undisputed need for change. These voices have said: "Enough is enough."

At Stage Sight, an organisation designed to create an offstage workforce that is more reflective of our society today, we have known this all too well. We issued this statement: "We stand against racism, we stand for inclusion, we stand with our black members, colleagues and the entire black community. We must unite and speak out. We stand for change. We are Stage Sight, we are them and they are us. #BlackLivesMatter."

Earlier this month, my friend – and Stage Sight committee member – Mark Dakin spoke out against structural racism in the industry in an open letter, in which he voiced the need for institutional change and called for a response.

Mark is a well-respected technical director, who has carved a path in technical theatre for many to follow. He wrote: "As a man of colour, the privilege of silence is something I do not have."

For years, Stage Sight has been clearly calling out that the theatre industry could do more to observe and question the choices it has made. It is clear the sector must go further and do more.

If you are in a position of power and don't create change and lift others up, I ask you to do better

Over the years, I've repeatedly heard that the lack of role models is a significant factor in the lack of diversity in our offstage workforce. I would ask, as a British Asian woman, how much space those in positions of power give to women – especially women of colour – to play the part of a role model.

If you hold power, know that you are in a position to use your privilege to address this issue. If, in that position, you don't create change and lift others up, I ask you to do better.

Like many, I found recent events distressing. I recently tweeted: "I don't want time to heal the pain we feel this week. I want *change* to heal the pain – for racism to have no space in our world of tomorrows. #BlackLivesMatter." The events around the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement have created a debate in the sector. We're asking each other to look closely at how we behaved, and how we will respond to the urgent need for change.

I struggle to talk about race. I've spent my whole life being defined by the colour of my skin, which is a pretty lazy description of my identity. I am creative, caring, impatient and many more things. I am made up of more than a pigment called melanin, and I rebel against labels, because it's exciting to be more than the label imposed on you by others. But while I struggle to talk about my race, I very clearly draw associations between race and opportunity.

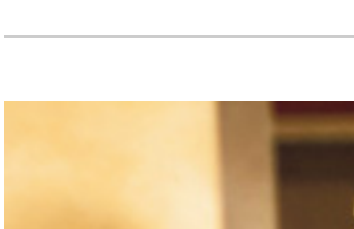
My dad came to the UK in 1967, aged 16, with his father. Within two weeks of arriving, his father died of a heart attack, and he had to settle into a new country by himself. So Dad joined the civil service and continued to work there for 52 years. He tells the story of how he asked to go on a training course, but his boss said there was no money for him to attend.

I know how Dad felt, seeing his white colleagues go off to their training sessions, while he looked on. It fills me with sadness. He tells this story often because, even today, at the age of 70, it still hurts him. My dad's story signifies his hope and ambition. He wanted to be the best he could be – a universal desire that most humans would rightly wish for – and a very real barrier was put up to stop him progressing.

RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE



Drama school racism: Students call out top schools and reveal stories of abuse



Diversity, of all kinds, must not be an afterthought



Prema Mehta. Photo: Joseph Lynn

In my early years as a lighting designer, I started out in pub theatres and fringe venues. My first actual paid work came from Tamasha Theatre Company's co-founders Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar. Janet Steel from Kali Theatre also offered me early opportunities. I'll always be indebted to these companies.

As a British-Asian designer I ask myself: why was I only matched or considered well-suited to light British-Asian productions?

But as a British-Asian designer I ask myself: why was I only matched or considered well-suited to light British-Asian productions? And if British-Asian productions aren't making it on to our West End stages, what does this mean for my career progression? I find it ironic that recently people have been comfortable asking: "Do you think you are getting work because of your race?" Using basic maths across a 15-year career, I could point out how wrong this question is, but that's obvious, right?

Ultimately this is about who has the right to decide how ambitious someone else should be. Do we all have a responsibility to hold open the doors? Should those in a position of power be more mindful of others as they hold their space?

Recent weeks have raised an awareness of what is happening around us, and we must all have the confidence and responsibility to call it out when we see it. The way things were done needs changing.

I founded Stage Sight for exactly these reasons. When I feel hurt or angry, I know the answer lies in change. Stage Sight was created to make change happen. Our process has always been around three key areas: how the sector recruits, how it reaches out to invite people in and how it creates new pathways into the industry.

That the sector is inclusive is more vital than ever. We must ensure that, when our industry returns to strength, it does so because it includes everyone, inclusive of their ethnicity, class and disability. I recognise that the practicalities of change can be overwhelming to an institution that may recognise the need to change old patterns of behaviour, but needs support to find a new way of working.

We are talking about the creation of a new identity – about building a sector that reflects our society today. I believe that now is the time to listen, plan and commit to new ways.

I wonder if generosity and bravery play the biggest part in our next steps. The generosity of those who speak bravely and with openness, and the response of those actively supporting this with long awaited practical change. It will require a different kind of bravery, openness and reflection.

Our next steps are far from straightforward, but moving forwards feels better than standing still. The journey to being better must be a shared goal. At Stage Sight, we continue to make change, and over the coming months we will work with our members to ensure change is implemented.

This won't be done overnight, because for sustained change to be embedded it needs to be created with thought and planning, not false promise. But yes, change is coming, you have our word.

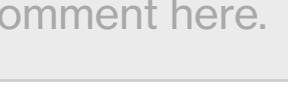
The British Newspaper Archive

Theatre history at your finger tips
Discover theatre's forgotten stories from 1880-2007 on The British Newspaper Archive
[Click here to start exploring](#)

THE STAGE

- Backstage & Technical
- diversity
- Hot Topics
- Jobs & Auditions

SHARE THIS



Add New Comment

Type your comment here.

POST

Theatre news straight to your inbox
Sign up to receive our free regular newsletters

THE STAGE

More on this topic

NEWS

Theatres not affected by Scottish Covid passport scheme, government confirms

BY THOM DIBDIN

NEWS

BECTU declares 'biggest push' in its history to improve freelancers' rights

BY GIVERNY MASSO

NEWS

New Rumi musical aims to break down Western stereotypes of Middle East

BY GIVERNY MASSO

NEWS

Producers' 'worst fears confirmed' after government publishes insurance details

BY GEORGIA SNOW

Advice

The Stage/Razzamataz Theatre Schools scholarship winners 2021

BY PAUL VALE

Actor Suraj Shah: 'Increasing representation is important for the industry as a whole'

BY JOHN BYRNE

Actor Adeyinka Akinrinade: 'Remember that someone believes in you'

BY JOHN BYRNE

Writer and performer Victor Esses: 'Nobody comes out with a finished project on day one'

BY JOHN BYRNE

Recommended for you

NEWS

Theatres not affected by Scottish Covid passport scheme, government confirms

BY THOM DIBDIN

LONG REVIEWS

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

MINERVA THEATRE, CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

NEWS

BECTU declares 'biggest push' in its history to improve freelancers' rights

BY GIVERNY MASSO

REVIEWS

The Memory of Water

HAMPSTEAD THEATRE, LONDON

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Theatre news straight to your inbox
Sign up to receive our free regular newsletters

THE STAGE

THE STAGE

Most Read

Across The Stage this week

1

Punchdrunk sets up London home and announces largest live show to date

2

Gregory Doran temporarily steps down from RSC to care for terminally ill Antony Sher

3

Frozen

4

Full casting confirmed for West End Cabaret revival

5

LAMDA board criticised over Sarah Franklins departure in open letter

6

88 miles per hour! Back to the Future's designer on why the car is the star

7

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

8

Leopards

9

Coronavirus: Matthew Bourne productions to be broadcast on TV

10

Producers' 'worst fears confirmed' after government publishes insurance details

Theatre news straight to your inbox
Sign up to receive our free regular newsletters

THE STAGE

Your subscription helps ensure our journalism can continue

Invest in The Stage today with a subscription starting at just £3.98

SUBSCRIBE

THE STAGE

- NEWSPAPER

News

Reviews

Opinion & Advice

Features

Long Reads

Big Interviews
- MORE

Archive

Dating

Suppliers

Get Into Theatre

Jobs

Tickets

Training
- INFO

About

Contact Us

Advertising Enquiries

Where to buy

FAQs

Press

Careers
- AWARDS

The Stage Awards

The Stage Debut Awards

The Stage Edinburgh Awards
- LEGAL

Terms and conditions

Advertising terms and conditions

Contributor agreement

Privacy policy

House rules

GDPR Requests
- DIGITAL

Digital Editions

Mobile Apps
- Subscribe**
Start a subscription today from just £3.98

SUBSCRIBE

We use cookies so we can provide you with the best online experience. By continuing to browse this site you are agreeing to our use of cookies. Click on the banner to find out more.

Cookie Settings

ACCEPT ALL COOKIES