

Johnny Williams III
2526 Bath St.
Staunton, VA 24401



Diversity and Inclusion Statement

Theatre has created an environment for me that I was always seeking out and struggled to establish in my personal life. I found theatre at a pivotal moment in my own life. I realized I was queer as I was entering high school and was not able to publicly own this identity at home. I remember being on stage for the first time and we all participated in an improv game. The director, Marc Nelson, told each of us that the main principle of doing improv correctly was supporting your fellow scene partner with the phrase “yes and”. I learned the stage is an accepting place where people are able to bring challenging ideas and stories to an audience and everyone involved supports a common goal: performing someone else’s story. Through being involved in theatre, I was also introduced to a community where I felt like my own story would be accepted and welcomed.

The concept of “yes and” has not only fueled my understanding of theatre, but also my understanding of teaching design. As a Shakespearean scholar I know how accessibility to theatre can be elitist. I strive continuously to create environments that support individuality and confront ideas of separation. In my classroom the prerequisites to participating in class are an open mind and a willingness to be brave. The only way this is possible is to build lessons and assignments that include voices that society has silenced or suppressed. My assigned readings, plays, articles, and production research always strives to break the cannon of who is at the table and which researchers and artists are analyzed.

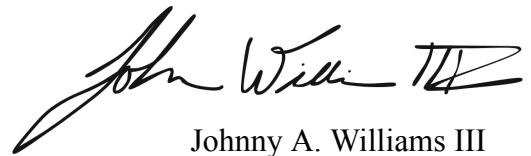
The undergraduate theatre department at Mary Baldwin University has created the Kaleidoscope Project to decolonize their curriculum. According to the Dean of Arts and Sciences Dr. Paul Menzer, “We chose [Kaleidoscope] because a kaleidoscope isn’t something you look at, but something you look with, and in doing so unlock a greater, hidden beauty. Similarly, as students proceed from course to course, a rich tapestry of multiethnic, multinational, multicultural, and multi-hued artistic expression steadily reveals itself.” This project started the year I began attending Mary Baldwin University and I have had the pleasure of helping to further the reach of the Kaleidoscope project into new areas. I created a 24 Hour Play Festival at MBU that was centered around the idea of bringing in the voices of the students on campus and allowing more students the experience on stage who may not otherwise gain that experience. This project was in collaboration with Kuumba Players, a performance troupe on campus celebrating African American life through the arts. Within 24 hours three new plays were written and staged by students on campus and out of the participants over half of them had never participated in theatre at MBU before. The work was dynamic and tackled issues that the students face in their everyday lives. Through the 24 Hour Play Festival several new students

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signed up for theatre arts classes and even more joined auditions for the plays this season. It takes work to see progress and I am proud that I have been a part of the work that is the Kaleidoscope Project.

Theatre has always been a safe space where I have felt able to be myself and express my art. I remember when I first bowed during the curtain call of that play directed by Marc Nelson I thought, "I have found my calling". A short 5 years later I was directing a play on the same stage and when I saw the students bow I realized, "Now *this* is my calling". I want to be the facilitator of an open theater experience. I want to be for others what theater has always been for me: a place where people can feel safe to be brave.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Williams III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "W".

Johnny A. Williams III