



WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT INCLUSION AND WHY IT MATTERS

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THE BIJOU THEATRE SECOND BALCONY

If you've never visited the Second Balcony of the Bijou Theatre, I'll do my best to describe it for you.

From the lobby, a side hallway leads to a stairwell, where you climb three flights of stairs. At the top, you pass through a doorway that remains locked most of the time. The sagging floorboards creak beneath your feet. Most of the original seats are broken or gone, and you can see the holes where the seats were bolted down. An elevated floor area,



directly behind the balcony rail, is probably the best place to sit and offers an unobstructed view of the stage. You wouldn't want to go up much higher. In the top-most reaches of the Second Balcony, the view is limited by load bearing supports, the balcony rail, and the ceiling of the Bijou itself.

Down in the deep well of the auditorium, and in the balcony below you, are the backs and shoulders of 700 other patrons. You're in the balcony *above* the balcony. Three stories up.

Performances sound great here, as they do anywhere in the theater, and for good reason. The people who designed the Bijou didn't have modern amplification. They relied instead upon the principles of acoustics, which are nearly perfect here. Dust motes hang in the air around you. In the early days, this part of the theatre would have been unbearably hot and filled with cigarette smoke. Now, it's filled with lighting equipment, aimed at the stage, and some metal folding chairs for the crew. If you find yourself here during a show, as I have, the experience is memorable.¹ There's the show itself, of course, but also there is something lonely, something grave. Having been closed to the public for so many decades, the Second Balcony is a place that invites contemplation and remembrance. Many people have been here before you.

The Bijou opened in 1909. It was built onto the old Lamar House Hotel, which was originally constructed in 1817.² From 1909 until the Bijou was integrated in the 1960s, the Second Balcony was the only place African Americans could sit. Back then, African Americans used a separate entrance, a separate bathroom, and a separate ticket office. Today, as you walk down Cumberland Avenue near Gay Street you pass this area. The separate entrance and ticket office were located somewhere in the vicinity of the iron fire steps, past the stage door entrance.

It would be impossible for me here to provide even a short history of the Bijou Theatre and Lamar House Hotel. What I offer you instead is a challenge. The next time you're at a Bijou show, look up. Think of the African Americans who sat in the Second Balcony while white people watched the show from below. Consider their struggle, and how, after centuries of slavery, a war was fought for their freedom. Think of how

– even after that war – society reorganized itself to exclude them. The Bijou is one of those buildings where we can still feel this history. It's a place where we can remember the people who fought for civil rights and honor their experience. More than that, it's a place where we can examine the structure of present society and consider how we can make it better.

I've had the pleasure of serving on the Bijou Board of Directors for several years, and during that time, I've seen a growing emphasis on telling the civil rights history of the Bijou. We have recently established a standing Historical Committee to focus on these issues, and the Second Balcony is vitally important in this regard. Maybe one day we will see the Second Balcony become a public space again, but not as a place of exclusion. My hope instead is that the Second Balcony could be a place where everyone – white and black alike – can honor and respect the history of African Americans in our community who suffered racism and segregation.

¹ My first time in the Second Balcony was spent watching Sam Bush play his mandolin. To this day, that performance is one of the most memorable of my life.
² Novelli, Dean; On a Corner of Gay Street: History of the Lamar House-Bijou Theatre, Knoxville, Tennessee 1817-1985, East Tennessee Historical Society (1986).

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