

AUBlackList Providing Space for Black Artists at American

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The representation of Black stories and voices in the performing arts has always been necessary but, seldom been fulfilled. The disparity in the artistic representation of Black voices is the exact issue that American University's new student organization, BlackList, aims to address.

BlackList was founded by two students at American University, Ngakiya Camara and Nia J. Mays. Camara describes BlackList as, "a space where black artists can cultivate, create, and realize their own art." The necessity for a space like this, according to Camara, stems from a lack of accurate representation of Black voices in the arts, specifically within the performing arts program at American University.

"The Department of Performing Arts doesn't have roles for us," Camara said. "The roles that are there are very stereotypical. We don't want to be the Black best friends, we don't want to be the side characters. So, we decided to build something where we center ourselves."

Mays, who is majoring in Theater Arts as well as Business Administration noted, "We [American University's Performing Arts Department] have a million student theater groups, we have so many opportunities to get involved in theater, but nobody was providing a role for somebody who looked like *me*."

Black artists on campus, like Mays, have found themselves looking to their peers in an effort to have their voices heard. "BlackList is how I look inward to my community," Mays said. "I'm learning how to hold people accountable and how to treat *me* in my Black body.

While the Department of Performing Arts has recently been taking steps in the right direction, the Theater Arts program at American has not always provided Black students with a platform to share their stories or act in roles that are truly representative of their cultural expressions.

Edmée Faal, a senior pursuing a degree in Theater Arts, discussed how the Department of Performing Arts can strive towards diversifying their productions, by acknowledging who they are bringing into the department and the opportunities that are being offered within their productions. "If we're not having a diverse group of students entering into the school we are already starting a few steps behind."

Despite the initiatives that the department took to diversify their classes and productions, such as creating a commission for student selection of shows, student organizations are still necessary for those who want to see their art realized without having to wait for someone to tell them it can be.

"The student theater groups are the places where people from smaller, marginalized communities and people who want to do more experimental work end up going. It's exciting to see groups like the BlackList take ownership themselves instead of letting slow change stop them from making an immediate change right now," Faal said.

Though AU has been operating remotely, the BlackList is still holding artist panels, masterclasses, and several other art-focused events. However, showcases and productions the organization intended to display have been on intermission.

"We're figuring out what works and what doesn't. When we're in person, hopefully, people will get to see who we are and we'll be bigger and better," Bekah Umansky-Zornosa, BlackList's Public Relations Coordinator said.


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