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Dear VCUarts Theatre students, faculty, and colleagues,

The past two weeks have shown us the national and international rage that has exploded following the release of the horrific videos showing the police murder of George Floyd. This coming after the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and before them, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and before them...the list goes on and on back to the founding of our country. The oppression of black people was built into the DNA of this country. This brutality needs to stop, and the systems that perpetuate the racism that cause this brutality have to be ended.

I am moved to tears and anger at these senseless killings. I also recognize that, as a white woman, I will never be able to fully understand the deep pain and fear that my African American students, faculty, and colleagues feel every day. The only thing I can do is honor your feelings, whether they be rage, deep grief, or just plain exhaustion in having to fight this battle over and over again. I can also re-commit to my own personal journey to understand the times when I have, through the privilege I enjoy by virtue of the color of my skin, participated in the systems that perpetuate oppression.

On Friday, many of my faculty and I will meet with students from the Black Theatre Association. We will come to that meeting with open ears and hearts. In the fall, I begin my fourth year as Chair of the Theatre Department at VCU. I have been committed to making our department more transparent, equitable, kind, and honest, and now I want to recommit myself and the department to take action to promote racial justice and social equity and to continue to examine our own complicity in all forms of institutionalized oppression.

Our world has changed radically in the past several months. We've had to re-examine the way we teach, the way we learn, and we've also seen all the social and racial inequities in our country laid bare. Our black and other communities of color have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and that disquieting fact also exposes the ugly truth of a racist system that exploits and carelessly casts aside people of color.

Theatre has often been the vehicle for great societal change, from Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. What we do as theatre artists changes hearts and minds, and that is where real change begins.

I look forward to our conversation on Friday, and to all of our subsequent conversations. I am heartened by your passion and courage, and please stay safe and healthy.

Best,



Sharon Ott, Chair/Artistic Director, VCUarts Department of Theatre