

Coalition for Theatre Education

Statement on Freedom of Expression

September, 2008

Theatre educators and their students work at the confluence of two of the foundational values that support a free society: freedom of expression and the unfettered pursuit of knowledge. Yet too often educational theatre is confronted with external efforts to draw boundaries defining acceptable content. Where these constraints are undertaken without a sound artistic or educational purpose, they are acts of censorship that have the effect of stifling free expression and stunting the educational process. The undersigned organizations affirm their support for the following standards for free expression in educational theatre. For the purposes of this document, educational theatre is defined as any theatre performance or learning activity in an educational setting for students in kindergarten through post-graduate study.

Standards for freedom of expression in educational theatre

1. Theatre programs operating in a school, college, university, or other educational setting should provide diverse productions, teaching activities, and support materials that examine the spectrum of human experience and present a range of points of view concerning the issues and problems of our times. No theatre production should be altered or canceled because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
2. Scripts, textbooks, and other production and educational materials should be selected for their capacity to inform, educate, enlighten, and engage the interest of the school theatre community. In no case should materials that meet educational or artistic criteria be excluded on the basis of the race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation, or the social, political, or religious views, of the author or another creative participant.
3. The right of free expression does not encompass a right to make changes in another artist's work without permission. Educators, administrators, and directors have an obligation to provide the public with truthful access to the complete work of art. Educators and administrators should be aware that selective censorship or editing of a script without the consent of the author is a violation of copyright law.
4. Student writing for the theatre should be subject to the same standards and protections with respect to free expression as any other work that is considered for production or classroom use.
5. The right of an individual to admission to any theatre production, workshop, or class must not be abridged on the basis of race, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, social or political views, or disability. Where admission restrictions on the

basis of age are deemed necessary, such restrictions should be reasonable and consistent with community standards.

6. Educational theatres should cooperate with those persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free artistic expression.

Freedom of expression in college and university theatres

At the post-secondary level, the principles of academic freedom are well established. We endorse the 1990 policy statement on academic freedom and artistic expression by the American Association of University Professors, which states in part that “artistic expression in the classroom, studio, and workshop... merits the same assurance of academic freedom that is accorded to other scholarly and teaching activities. Since faculty and student artistic presentations to the public are integral to their teaching, learning, and scholarship, these presentations no less merit protection.”

We further endorse the 1997 report of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education’s Ethics Task Force, which reads in part:

As theatre educators, we espouse freedom of speech, equal access, and diversity. We seek to create responsible learning environments in which any idea may be explored. We insist that these learning environments are sensitive and responsive to differences in religion, race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, or sexual orientation. We expect to foster engagement that leads to awareness, understanding and respect of self and other, and courage to push boundaries in learning about and making theatre.

Guidelines for theatre faculty and staff

In asserting a right to free expression in making artistic choices, theatre educators must be prepared to accept responsibility for these choices. Toward that end, we encourage all theatre faculty and staff to devote significant time and resources to the following goals:

1. Mastery of content (literature, history, criticism, skills, etc.) and the ability to articulate a philosophy of theatre and education to administrators, parents, and students.
2. The formulation of educational and artistic objectives for each play, scene, reading, and/or creative drama experience.
3. The development of workable techniques, activities, and materials relevant to the interests, abilities, and maturity of students.
4. Regular communication regarding educational theatre activities and goals to students, school administration, and (where appropriate) parents. This may include providing students with instruction on educational and artistic reasons for inclusion of particular plays in the repertory, and discussion of considerations such as audience, technical capabilities, casting, and other factors that influence repertory choices.

5. Respect for works of dramatic art, which encompasses paying royalties as appropriate, complying with copyright law, and obtaining permission for text changes when required by contract or statute to do so.
6. A good-faith effort to inform administrators of potentially controversial issues well in advance of the scheduled production.
7. Consideration of community expectations and attitudes in the selection of study and performance materials.
8. Providing the community with information regarding the artistic and educational objectives of the theatre program.
9. Maintaining an environment in the classroom, rehearsal, and performance that promotes the free exchange and examination of ideas of social significance.

Additional concerns

The communal quality of the theatre experience makes it a powerful venue for engaging individuals who hold divergent views in a conversation about difficult questions and issues. The theatre educator can and should facilitate student and audience dialogues around the subject matter of a theatre production. This can be done by framing the issues in director's notes in the playbill and by arranging panel discussions, post-show audience talkbacks, lectures, community meetings, and other forums in connection with performances.

Finally, the right of free expression includes the right to refrain from speech or performance that is contrary to one's personal values. Theatre educators should be prepared to offer alternative performance opportunities, where practical, to accommodate students who have sincere and conscientious objections to performing specific material in a production. To prevent disruption of the production process, we recommend asking students to acknowledge that they have read the entire script before auditioning.

Endorsed by the governing boards of the *Educational Theatre Association*, the *Association for Theatre in Higher Education*, and the *American Alliance for Theatre and Education*, summer, 2008.

This document was created under the auspices of the Coalition for Theatre Education, a collaboration among the leadership of the *American Alliance for Theatre and Education*, the *Association for Theatre in Higher Education*, and the *Educational Theatre Association*. CFTE is actively seeking additional *organizational endorsements* of this statement; contact Don Corathers at dcorathers@edta.org.

Portions of this text are adapted from "Freedom of Artistic Expression in Educational Theatre," published by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education in 1993.

WHY PROFESSIONALS BELIEVE IN THEATRE STUDIES

STUDENTS ACQUIRE SKILLS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING FOR THEATRE IS A COLLABORATIVE ART FORM.

"Theater is about problem-solving... In a theater work, there are problems that presuppose various solutions, each quite different from the other, but all equally credible. Theater teaches us that there is more than one way to describe the same issue, equally revealing, equally compelling. It is another form of tolerance and understanding. Theater is about making choices!"

DEAN DONALD HARRIS

Dean of the College of the Arts, Ohio State University

THE MAJOR IN THEATRE ARTS OR PERFORMANCE STUDIES PREPARES STUDENTS TO PURSUE PROFESSIONAL GOALS AS ARTISTS AND EDUCATORS.

"Young people who learn the arts do better in every phase of their lives."

MERYL STREEP

Academy-Award Winning Actor

Lead Actor in "Sophie's Choice," "The Bridges of Madison County," and "Marvin's Room"

"My theatre education at the college level has given me the desire and respect for research, as well as the discipline and techniques which I apply to my work today."

ISAIAH WASHINGTON

Studied at Howard University

Lead Actor in "Clockers," "Get on the Bus" and "Love Jones"

"Although I have read all the modern plays I could lay my hands on, and many books on the subject of drama, I realize how inadequate such a haphazard, undirected mode of study must necessarily be. With my present training I might hope to become a mediocre journeyman... I want to be an artist or nothing."

EUGENE O'NEILL

Playwright "Moon for the Misbegotten," "Desire Under the Elms," and "Long Day's Journey Into Night"

(A letter written to George Pierce Baker in 1914 asking to be admitted to the theatre program at Harvard University)

THEATRE IN HIGHER EDUCATION CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR CROSSING CULTURES
WITHIN THE THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE.

"Each time that I plunge into a new theater experience whether in the classroom or in a professional theater situation it becomes immediately a provocation to learning or to learning anew from the starting position. I must then reexamine or reabsorb my own culture or a new one. Theater provides a bridge with which all persons should cross for on the other side lies civilization."

LLOYD RICHARDS

Artistic Director, The National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene
O'Neill Theatre Center

Former Artistic Director, Yale Repertory Theatre

Director of Broadway Productions of August Wilson's "Fences,"
"Joe Turner's Come and Gone," and "The Piano Lesson "

THEATRE IN HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDES STUDENTS WITH CRUCIAL LIFE SKILLS
THAT THEY CAN UTILIZE IN A WIDE RANGE OF PROFESSIONS INCLUDING BUSINESS,
GOVERNMENT, LAW, THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INDUSTRY.

"Higher education in theatre and the other arts provides students with crucial life skills that are fundamental to success in the business world, regardless of whatever career choice an individual decides to pursue. Effective interpersonal communication, group problem-solving ability, organizational skills, creative thinking and enhanced self-esteem are all benefits of a quality arts education experience."

RICHARD S. GURIN

President & Chief Executive Officer, Binney & Smith Inc.
(Makers of Crayola Products)

I am trying to bridge the gap between psychologists and software design engineers. I draw heavily on my theatre background for this work. I bring what I learned in theatre studies about people to my work in technology. I value and consciously apply aesthetic criteria and intuitive thinking to my work. I've found that the most highly skilled engineering designers depend on both."

SUSANNE JUL
PhD Candidate in Computer Science with an Undergraduate Focus in
Theatre
University of Michigan

THEATRE TRAINING AWAKENS THE STUDENTS' INTUITIVE, PERCEPTIVE
CAPACITIES AS WELL AS THEIR LOGICAL, ANALYTICAL CAPACITIES.

"Theatre studies taught me to overcome fear, speak with
authority, and probably most importantly practice empathy. I could not
have become a successful financial planner without the application of that
creative process to my work with clients."

MAUREEN ACETO
C.F.P. (certified financial planner), Vice-President Benefits, Inc.
Graduate: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee BFA 1971

"The influence of theater in my education manifests itself
everyday in my executive work life. Especially important to my career
success has been developing the art of self-expression. My theatre
training has given me the critical communication skills and confidence to
present with clarity, poise, and impact."

LIN WILENSKY
Project Consultant, The Walt Disney World Resort

THEATRE IN HIGHER EDUCATION ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND
THE UNIQUE HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE
THROUGH INTELLECTUAL AND EXPERIENTIAL INVESTIGATION.

"Theatre, one of the oldest and most enduring forms of art, enables us to
understand not only the past but also the present. Theatre history and
dramatic literature are embodiments of the cultural assumptions and values
that in each era have made theatre a mirror of society and this mirroring
can bring the concerns of the time to the forefront."

DR. OSCAR BROCKETT
Author, "History of Theatre"
Z.T. Scott Family Chair in Drama and Director of the Center for
Dramatic and Performance Studies,
Department of Theatre and Dance, The University of Texas at Austin

EACH HUMAN BEING WHO ENCOUNTERS THEATRE IS ENCOURAGED TO IMAGINE. AND THROUGH THE IMAGINATION, WE CAN MAKE SIGNIFICANT, CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGES IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

"Some of us make theatre: that's our profession. All of us 'are' theatre: that's the essence of our human condition. As human beings we are 'actors' (we act out our lives) and 'spectators' (we observe ourselves in action) - We are 'playwrights' of our own words and 'directors' of our deeds. To be human is to be able to invent the future and not merely to wait for it. To teach and to learn theatre, is to learn and to teach humanity."

DR. AUGUSTO BOAL

Author, "Theatre of the Oppressed"

Founder and Artistic Director of the Centers for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro and Paris

"Theatre studies provide students with a range of skills that can be usefully employed across occupations. Engaging with theatre arts shapes people to be articulate communicators, effective listeners, perceptive thinkers, and task-oriented leaders. Performing in the theatre or spending an evening as a spectator creates a sense of community that can ripple into wider social spheres. Theatre education prepares citizens to function effectively and joyfully in cultural life."

JILL DOLAN

President, ATHE

The Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) is an organization of individuals and institutions that provides vision and leadership for the profession and promotes excellence in theatre education. ATHE actively supports scholarship through teaching, research and practice and serves as a collective voice for its mission through its publications, conferences, advocacy, projects, and through collaborative efforts with other organizations.