Setting Boundaries: Lessons on When to Not Make Theatre

A research presentation by Allie Fenwick
What does theatre DO?

➔ It can influence the way we feel about ourselves and the world
➔ Start conversations
Main idea

To determine boundaries for content in theatre

Why?

➔ To decide whether to stage controversial or harmful content
➔ To establish criteria for theatre makers and participants to make this decision

Main issues for creating boundaries

➔ Representation
➔ Taboo subject matter
➔ Personal limitations/boundaries
➔ Poor timing
Method

➔ Personal observation and experiences
➔ Class discussion
➔ Theatre theorists (Brecht, Rousseau, Horace)

➤➤ Consider your own opinion on the issues I address
➤➤ How might these challenges be seen differently?
Representation

➔ How the culture constructs certain individuals and groups
➔ Who should be able to speak for, or represent, whom
  (socio-political definition)

If representation matters in advertisements, movies, and political activism, it certainly matters in theatre
Representation

➔ Consider how the work represents people depicted in the performance and the audience members
➔ Example: Robert Lepage’s *Kanata*
  ◆ Argument for artistic expression
  ◆ Artistic expression does not outweigh its problems
Representation

When this model *doesn’t work*

→ *Prom Queen: The Musical* defunded by Thames Valley district school board and London district school board
→ Ambiguity
  ◆ When a work displays multiple controversial perspectives
  ◆ Productive discussion over perfect representation?
Cultural Taboos

➔ Should err on the side of caution when it comes to depicting children in risky situations
➔ There are lower risk ways to address difficult cultural taboos

Cultural taboos that we should address?

The legal system “should focus on the abuse and exploitation of real children and not fictional or imaginary ones” (Writers Union of Canada 2005).
Timing and Audience Experience

- Horace: under the republican government, the gladiator battles of ancient Athens “animated the people with courage and a love of glory,” but under the emperors of Rome the populace became “brutal, bloodthirsty, and cruel” (Gerould 205).
- 1955 production of *Merchant of Venice* at Stratford

In a unique time and place where the content is closely connected to an audience’s experience of a specific oppression, it is perhaps best to not traverse this precarious line at all.
Contestations and Questions

Challenges to my inquiry

➔ Diversity within communities
➔ Different sensitivities should not excuse lack of care
➔ Complete elimination of censorship has real risks
Conclusion

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➔ Where to draw the line and set boundaries
➔ Continuing the conversation
➔ Keeping thought-provoking theatre alive while also being critical of it
Thank you! Any questions?

Things to think about after today:

➔ Your own boundaries/limitations for content
➔ How you can apply this to your own life and work