

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.” (See Appendix A for the full text.)

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 administrators

We make the following observations and recommendations regarding “best practices” for administrators with respect to educational theatre.

1. We urge schools and school districts to establish policies recognizing the regularly-appointed theatre faculty as the most qualified and appropriate people to make decisions regarding play selection, casting, and other aspects of theatre programming.

2. We acknowledge that some school administrators will reserve the right to review faculty members’ repertory choices. Where such review is desired, we encourage the establishment of policies designed to prevent arbitrary restrictions on content and to ensure that prior restraint of a theatre production is exercised rarely and only as a last administrative resort. Administrators who seek to exercise prior restraint should be required to meet a burden of proof that the proposed production is inconsistent with the theatre program’s established artistic and educational objectives. The policy should also constrain administrators from retaliation against a theatre educator on the basis of a

repertory choice. (For a specimen district policy on prior restraint of theatre productions, see Appendix B.)

3. When faced with community objections or challenges to a proposed theatre production, institutions should consider these concerns according to their own established policies regarding other curricular matters such as selection of course readings.

We further encourage administrators to accept these additional responsibilities with respect to free artistic expression in their theatre programs:

- Making a commitment to hiring competent, qualified theatre educators.
- Maintaining an atmosphere of free inquiry.
- Supporting students in their exploration of a wide range of issues.
- Becoming familiar with the materials and practices of educational theatre.
- Promoting aesthetic education and artistic expression.
- Attending school performances.

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.