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### SAFE SPACES AND ARTISTIC RESPONSIBILITY

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## **Safe Spaces and Artistic Responsibility**

### **Abstract**

Theatres and other artistic venues have often been referred to as a “safe space.” Based on a survey of adults between the ages of 18 and 67, of all genders, and 40% coming from non-arts-related careers, it was determined that 70% of people believed that an artistic space should be required to be a safe space. Survey participants demonstrated that a safe space meant a judgement free zone, a space of mutual respect and collaboration. This contradicts the official definition, which requires a safe space to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations. With this dissonance between the official definition and the public’s views on safe spaces, the arts have been misbranded as a ‘safe space.’ The misbranding of theatre has become a toxic characteristic that promotes censorship of threatening or challenging work.

In this two-part study, public opinions on safe spaces are presented and a conversation between theatre artists on the basis of threatening work is analyzed. Jackie Sibblies Drury’s play *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915* and Bruce Norris’s *Downstate* are analyzed for their threatening content and challenging benefits to audiences. Although the theatre cannot be defined as a safe space because of its innate characteristic to challenge artists and audience members, it can provide a supportive and equitable environment. This branding provides the audience experiences they desire while not inhibiting work that is presented onstage. By supporting the theatre as an equitable space, artists have the opportunity to present challenging work that provokes an open dialogue.

It is 2019 and we can find content warnings branded on works just underneath the synopsis. We are given content warnings in literature courses, movie theaters, and theatrical productions. The artistic community has branded itself as a “safe space,” meaning that it is a welcoming place for all to collaborate and challenge each other. This misbranding has become a toxic attribute to theatre because of its mischaracterization – although it is not *safe*, it is supportive and equitable. We are confronting this misbranding more frequently while producing controversial and challenging works that disprove the identity of a ‘safe space’ within the arts. Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Bruce Norris demonstrated the influential misbranding of a safe space while his newest work premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in fall 2018. *Downstate* contains nearly any content warning imaginable and demonstrates the danger of consensus and concerns of emotional safety within the arts. This semester, I studied the rebranding of safe spaces in conjunction with the premier of *Downstate*.

What is the term ‘safe space’ attempting to communicate? I distributed an electronic survey to gather results from people both involved in art creation and outside career fields. My results voiced opinions from people between the ages of 18 and 67, of all genders, and 40% worked in non-arts-related careers. These voices demonstrated that a safe space meant a judgement free zone, a space of mutual respect and collaboration. Additionally, they cited that safe spaces should allow everyone to feel comfortable and welcomed, without fears. Over two thirds of the responses also indicated that a safe space should be a requirement of an artistic space. The official definition of a safe space was first presented in 1970 and defined as “a place intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations (Merriam-Webster). According to my survey’s results and theatre professionals, the point of a ‘safe space’ is not to hide from any realities or to shield the audience from

threatening subjects. The point is to create a space where “diverse voices and perspectives can be expressed and heard” and doing so will ensure that the space will “not only negate toxic, homogeneous viewpoints but also foster deeper understanding wherein more evocative learning and creation can occur” (Golosky). Based upon the idea that exposure to bias, conflict, criticism, or anything threatening would dissolve the safe space, the theatre cannot be considered one at all. As a student of the theatre, we are taught time and time again that the theatre exists to challenge, to take risks, and to expand knowledge through discussion. The premise and reasons why we need a space like this still exist – but we must identify the correct terminology to not misinform the public of our intentions.

Many plays bring up taboo or threatening topics in order to start a dialogue of the content. Jackie Sibblies Drury’s play *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915* shows a rehearsal room of actors creating a new play of what has been called the “first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Isherwood). This play caught attention with its sensitive content while being premiered at the Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago and the Soho Rep Theatre in New York in 2012. While playing the German soldiers that facilitated a mass genocide of the African tribes, the aggression that the actors embody becomes threatening throughout the rehearsal. After debating the validity of the genocide and becoming emotionally charged, the actors bound the African soldier in ropes and reenact a death by hanging. With the content presented to the audience, the theatre that chooses to produce this show dissolves the safe space that is thought to be required by so many.

Is it possible that we have misbranded the idea of safety in theatre at the consequence of censoring threatening topics? Pieces with controversial content are still being performed widely.

Within the next year *We Are Proud to Present...* will be performed in 5 different cities in America, including Austin, Dallas, and Chicago (Dramatic Publishing). The controversial work continues, despite dissolving the safe space for audience members, yet audience members continue to buy tickets. From creating a dialogue about taboo subjects, we allow ourselves the chance to discuss and learn from each other; therefore, investigating the hidden aspects of our history and growing from the shared experiences. A rebranding of what theatre is trying to achieve must be performed in order to continue developing work from different perspectives and potentially challenging material. Theatre professional Julia Rada stated the term “‘safe space’ is a misnomer when, in fact, we are talking about a ‘supportive environment.’” At the Mid-America Theatre Conference in 2015, panelists discussing safety in theatre contributed, “education is inherently unsafe, fundamentally designed to challenge one’s sense of boundaries” (Rada). When a safe space is created, it is often guided by the personal bias of what the facilitator believes to be safe, without the ability to take into consideration the personal experiences of each audience member (Golosky). Artists cannot guarantee a ‘safe’ space for their audiences, but they can present them with a supportive space, or an equitable space, fulfilling all the needs of what was previously misidentified.

To dissect the validity of this premise, I composed a study using the one of the most controversial works of the year. Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago premiered one of the most challenging works available in late September 2018. *Downstate* written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Bruce Norris sold out audiences and was granted a 7-show extension through mid-November 2018 (Steppenwolf Theatre Company). The play will be transferring to The National Theatre in London in spring 2019 (Longman). *Downstate* contained nearly every content warning imaginable, including graphic descriptions of child abuse and rape, drug use,

violence, language, and a graphic depiction of suicide. *Downstate* was emotionally controversial because of the deep humanization of sex offenders presented. While we see the mundane tasks of life from such a marginalized group, we begin to believe in the possibility of forgiveness or extending compassion towards people whose debt to society flourishes with their continued existence. We are reminded of the causation of their position with scathing lines: “my husband loves his golden retriever he didn’t stick his dick in her mouth” (Norris, *Downstate*). Performer and sex offender, Dee, fondly describes the supposedly consensual 2-year relationship he had with a 14-year-old boy actor playing Tootles in *Peter Pan* before the young boy died of AIDS. The group home roommates create a social hierarchy and take turns ranking themselves against one another. Norris uses this purposefully threatening imagery to evoke an emotional struggle from audiences. The production received a wide variety of opinions, including 4 of 4 stars from Chis Jones of the Chicago Tribune stating *Downstate* was “one of the more incendiary and thus important productions” (Jones). Alternatively, New City Stage reported Norris’s controversial ideals leading to “suggesting that a psychiatric disorder (pedophilia) and a social disease (rape culture) are comparable is not only ignorant but downright deranged and dangerous” (Greene). The alternating reviews of the work demonstrate the dialogue taking place. A previously taboo subject becoming available for discussion between creators and their audiences was a valuable outcome for *Downstate*.

Norris’s hope for the play was to challenge audiences to sympathize with characters who rarely have been given a voice. Looking for the most marginalized group of humans today, he detected that “having a common enemy – a universally despised class of criminal (namely pedophile) - helps the rest of us feel more virtuous about ourselves” (Norris, Bruce Norris on *Downstate*). Giving a voice to a group that is often silenced lead to a conversation of

forgiveness: when are debts to society paid? Who are you willing to extend yourself for? Norris challenges the audience to offer “a pretty radical amount of compassion” to a group that has been historically “denied sympathy.” To understand this play in the context of a safe space, I invited fellow undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members of the School of Theatre and Dance at Illinois State University to a reading of *Downstate* followed by a discussion of the content and the implications it held for creators and potential producers.

Actors, stage managers, academic faculty, and theatre historians came to voice their opinions on Norris’s newest work. During the reading, the group had difficulty processing the effects of Norris’s writing. The emotional battle that is created from the characterization and the content immediately dissolves any notion of a safe space. After reading, the group came to an understanding that discussions of these works need to be produced in order to create conversations about marginalized groups and although the content of *Downstate* was extremely controversial, it had no right to be censored from the stage.

How could a theatre company choose to produce this work in a way that promotes artistic responsibility and protects our audiences without censorship? Seventy percent of the people that were surveyed for their opinions on safe spaces believed that an artistic space should be required to be a safe space. If our audiences are paying for tickets and entering a theatre on the premise they are coming somewhere ‘safe,’ they can easily become disappointed and feel threatened when such works are produced. Our artistic responsibility as creators is to allow our audiences to understand what they will be experiencing in our care. Content warnings are a helpful resource in conjunction with threatening works. With adequate warning of the content, audience members can subject themselves to the performance at their own discretion. Theatres choosing to present potentially threatening work should cater to their audiences further. Offering post-

show discussions facilitated by a member of the theatre can involve audience members and monitor the direction of the conversation. Post-show discussions promote the discussion of all opinions, regardless of content. In order to best benefit the audience, the facilitation should be well planned. This could include setting guidelines of a respectful discussion and reframing questions to resonate with the audience and involve all parties (Fisher). Regardless of demographic characteristics, audience members should be able to use the post-show discussion as a time to reflect on the piece with one another in a supportive environment. Creating complementary resources allows a theatre to maintain its status as a supportive environment and equitable space without the misidentification of creating a safe space.



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