

Censorship in the Drama Classroom

The use of the F word. (But not THAT F word)



While reading Stephen Adly Guirgis's *Our Lady of 121st Street* aloud in my advanced drama class, an interesting thing happened. One of the characters in the play, Flip, a homosexual man, arrived back to his hometown in Harlem with his new

partner. Desperately wanting to fit in with his old crew and avoid ridicule, he asked his partner to "stop acting like such a f*ggot." The students in my 12th grade class weren't sure what to do. Were they "allowed" to say the word, or would they be scolded for using inappropriate language in school?

I felt the same conflict. I was so proud to live in a society where that word is filtered and censored—especially among teenagers. But, it's acting, and these students are playing a part, one that is meaningful and relevant and important in the story. Are these young teenagers able to tell the difference between acting and reality? Or, are the lines too blurry, making this language off-limits in a theatrical classroom setting? Will the impact of the language on students be greater than the intent of the playwright? One student said to another, "It's ok, we're acting. No one thinks you actually believe these things, or would say them in real life."

I started to wonder, am I teaching the actor or the student? Should I be encouraging young people to use this language while playing a character or foster their hesitation by allowing them to skip it? If the dialogue is honest to the character and the times, why not keep it truthful? If students can access the overarching themes and have the maturity level to read provocative plays, we should give them the opportunity to do so. Of course, forcing a student to say a word he or she is uncomfortable saying is not the point of this conversation. My question is, *should teachers and theatre educators be censoring theatre?*

I believe that theatre is a place for change, one where young actors can empathetically become someone else for a few hours. I truly believe in the magic of theatre, and censoring what teenagers can and cannot say in a play is damaging and unnecessary. "Censorship represents a tyranny over the mind," said Thomas Jefferson. It is harmful wherever it occurs—particularly so in the schools, because it prevents youngsters with inquiring minds from exploring the world, seeking truth and reason, stretching their intellectual capacities, and becoming critical thinkers. When the classroom environment is tightly monitored, honest exchange of views is replaced by guarded discourse, and teachers lose the ability to reach and guide their students effectively. This is especially true in the drama classroom. It's important

to me to foster a classroom environment that is open and free. I want my students to walk in the door and feel like they can be themselves. I stress my belief in an uncensored classroom, and the students often meet it with openness and creativity. If I am open and unbiased, I receive a truthful, curious, and creative student in return.

This holds true when directing at a high school level. One of my greatest goals as an artist and educator is introducing young people to socially relevant theatre. Theatre that challenges young minds to think deeply about a current issue. Theatre that sparks dialogue among teenagers about issues that are sometimes difficult to unpack. If a student is struggling with something, it's possible that a play can reach him or her in a way no adult can. For example, I'm currently directing a production of Bert V. Royal's, *Dog Sees God*. In the play, there is a character (a high school student) who is bullied to the point of suicide. The word 'f*ggot' is used by the bully over 20 times in the play. My initial, knee-jerk reaction was to edit every single one. The word is obviously disgusting and damaging. But, what is the message of the play? Why did I even choose to direct this piece in the first place? I chose it to make a change, to incite students to think critically, and do something about the rampant problem of school bullying and anti-gay slurs. So, if we omit all the instances of the word 'f*ggot', how will the true ugliness and reality of being bullied sink in? Ugly language is artfully used to identify the ugliness of the time or character that is saying it. It serves a specific purpose. Additionally, as a student plays this character, he develops a deep empathy for the bullied. What must it be like to hear these words in the school hallway? And, if they do hear them, why do they sit by and idly watch? It is my hope that this play will give them the courage needed to stand up to a bully or think twice before making fun of a classmate.

This similar subject came up when directing *Stop Kiss*, by Diana Son. In the play, two women are brutally beaten by a homophobic bystander who witnesses their first kiss. The attacker horribly beats them and yells out disgusting anti-gay slurs, such as 'p*ssy eating dykes.' I decided not to omit this language and tell the whole truth of this story, hoping that when a person walked away from the performance, he didn't remember hearing an anti-gay slur but, more importantly, the impact it had on the character, and the reason it was written. After opening night, a colleague of mine approached me, eyes filled with tears and stated, "If I had been exposed to theatre like this when I was in high school, my life would have gone very differently." Socially conscious theatre at a high school level even has the power to stir up feelings and affect adults in a positive and impactful way.

Additionally, if we don't push boundaries and work on relevant, interesting, thought-provoking theatre, how will these young people enter the word? If we raise our youth on a diet of strictly *Guys and Dolls* and *The Wizard of Oz*, how will they learn and be interested in writing or creating their own challenging works 20 years later? With the current array of Netflix and Hulu at the fingertips of nearly every student I teach, what is to say that they will become disinterested in live theatre if TV can present them with a much more exciting and challenging life outlook. Socially conscious and uncensored theatre in my classroom and my high school has sparked so many passionate and nuanced conversations among students, made them more engaged in theatre and literacy, and most importantly made them aware

of their language choices and how the things they say and do may impact another individual. As a director, I seek truth—whether in the characters I’m directing, the motivation of the scene, or the story itself. With that as my goal, censoring productions that are risky or uncomfortable would be doing a disservice to my students and myself.

Schools in 2018 must not only provide students with knowledge of many subject areas and training in essential skills, but must also educate students on core American values such as fairness, equality, justice, and respect for others. This might go without saying, but I’ll still say it: As educators, we must make it abundantly clear that we do not accept bigotry in any form, verbal or otherwise. When done strategically and artfully, playwrights and theatre teachers can convey that idea most clearly through the inclusion of such bigoted language. Ultimately, the question to ask oneself when deciding whether or not to censor is, *will the inclusion of a given word and the underlying reason for its use be more impactful than the initial shock of actually hearing it on stage?* If the answer is yes, you know you are making a brave and worthwhile decision. As teachers, we want to educate students and help them become empathetic and compassionate individuals. We also want them to be cognizant of the realities around them and not forget the ugliness of the past (and, sadly, the present). We want them to respect the arts and find passion for what they believe in. We want them to be socially and politically aware and use the theatre as a way of learning about, and ideally stopping, injustice.