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Tyler Grace Hunt

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Tyler Grace Hunt

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Sustainability and the Stage: Could Censoring in Theatre cause a Rift in Sociability?

The 2015 spring production of *Monty Python's Spamalot* at the South Williamsport Junior-Senior High School in Pennsylvania never happened. The play was cancelled after the principal expressed concerns over its “homosexual themes.” A month later, the Williamsport drama teacher was fired. In 2016, Danville Area High School stopped their production of the school version of *Avenue Q*. According to Superintendent Cheryl Latorre, “There is a lot of foul language in it and things that are so controversial.” The musical touches on themes such as sexual orientation and race. This is a concern because people who are exposed to different ideas and perspectives are more impacted by them when they are young, considering them in ways they never have before because they now have a better understanding of a concept or occurrence. High schools are censoring theatrical shows, which decreases the amount of exposure students have to so-called “inappropriate content” as well as exposure in the community which can lead to lack of acceptance in society.

Does the school have the right to censor plays, letting a board of directors determine what is “right” and “wrong” for our children to see? In 2013, *The Laramie Project* was canceled by the principal of Ottumwa High School, who said “the play is too adult for a high school production, but it does preach a great message.” Benzie Central High School in Michigan was planning to do a theatre production of a play about love and loss titled *Almost Maine* by John Cariani. However,

it contained “mature content.” One of the scenes in the play shows two young men falling in love, and when the school board got wind of it, the play was put on hold due to its controversial content. The schools claim that they are censoring anything that might challenge their educational mission:

Teachers, principals, and school administrators make decisions all the time about which books and materials to retain, add or exclude from the curriculum. They are not committing an act of censorship every time they cross a book off of a reading list, but if they decide to remove a book because of hostility to the ideas it contains, they could be. This does not mean that students and teachers have no First Amendment rights at school. (NCAC)

While schools have the right to censor material within their institution, students also have the right to freedom speech and expression. Students do not waive their first amendment rights when they walk through the doors of the schoolhouse. Whether or not a school can punish students, is based on when, where, and how students express themselves. When presenting a play or musical with “inappropriate” or “degrading content,” students are not disrupting the function of the school in any way, just telling a story through a creative, physical art form. Just because the board or administration does not care for the topics being covered, this lack of care should not grant them the power to infringe upon students’ freedom of expression.

Parents have also tried to “put their foot down” when it comes to the material their children are exposed to. According to the New York Post, some parents are concerned that shows such as *Pippin* and *Rent* should not be performed at the high school because they feel they are, “degrading them and their family because of what they live by” (Sterling). Parents concerned with inappropriate material are probably wondering why the drama teachers didn’t pick sweet,

morally straight shows such as *Guys and Dolls* with gambling, drinking and mockery of religion, or *The Music Man*, which is about an unrepentant con artist who faces no consequences for swindling an entire town in Iowa (Oleksinski). In response the school board stated, “If [profanity] is part of a structured activity, such as reading a book or a play, and the student is not choosing to say it [profanity] but read it, then it is not against [the student code of conduct] policy” (Schwartz). That being said, no one is forcing the students to be a part of their high school theatre troupe. These “morally degrading” performances show life as it truly is, and students will find out about the world one way or another. Would it not be better for them to learn about the various aspects of life and society from a creative outlet, in a safe environment where they can come to their own conclusions? If not, their ignorance in the future may do more damage than good when society expects them to have well-formed opinions on a wide variety of issues and topics.

Some schools will try to compromise the desires of the students with the demands of the parents by putting on the junior version or school edition of a play or musical. In the school edition of *Rent*, verses of songs, quotes and two same sex kisses were taken out. In the school version of *Almost Maine*, “Out of respect to faculty, staff, parents, and audience members who might find this scene to be controversial, objectionable, or inappropriate to perform, it has been rewritten as a traditional love story between a young man (a boy) and a young woman (a girl) [instead of two boys.]” (Cariani). One can understand that the school wants to change a few lines due to the profanity they wish for younger audiences not to hear, but removing too much will take away from the overall story and the messages being conveyed. By removing material which addresses themes of homosexuality, the school board is indirectly telling children that this sort of “behavior” is wrong. By censoring content related to the LGBTQ+ community, schools are not

only contributing to the ignorance of their children but furthering the social divide between those within the LGBTQ+ community and other students.

It is human nature that we are quick to judge what we do not understand and rebuke anything we feel may threaten our moral standards. Because young adults are not exposed to “inappropriate” material, they are unlikely to be accepting of others with different backgrounds than their own, because they were never exposed to those concepts. A local churchgoing mom, Greta Schwartz from Seaville, NJ, asked, “How do you expect them to understand their feelings if they don’t feel a connection, and arts can provide that connection. Maybe some topics are considered immoral, but shows are a success for a reason. They touch the heart.” We do not accept what we do not talk about and yet topics discussed in these shows such as the LGBTQIAPD+ community has existed as long as time itself. The only difference is acknowledgement. In the 1950’s, people did not talk about being gay. They were “in the closet,” and the reality of their existence went unspoken. It wasn’t until 1995, President Clinton gave Executive Order 12968 which established criteria for the issuance of security clearances and included “sexual orientation” for the first time in non-discrimination language (Exec. 12968). It is the twenty first century; the more people talk about these topics and are exposed to different ideas, the more likely they are to be accepting of them.

Theatrical plays and musicals aren’t the only creative platform battling with school censorship; books have also been banned for discussing ideas that are “different.” Books such as *Catcher in the Rye*, the *Harry Potter* series and *Lord of the Flies* have been banned in several high schools due to their “dark themes,” “glorification of witchcraft,” and “excessive violence.” These books talk about and discuss a so-called “damaging lifestyle” which includes drug use, homosexuality and cohabitation without marriage, and for these reasons books and shows alike

are being banned from high schools. Theatrical performances and books “have been banned or and censored due to their content and the age level at which they are aimed. In some cases children's books are viewed to have "inappropriate" themes for the age level at which they are written for” (Common). As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, the term “age appropriate” means “suitable or right for people of a particular age.” Homosexuality however is not an “age appropriate” concept, but something innate that occurs from birth to death and therefore cannot be defined by age. According to several studies conducted from 2007 to 2012, being homosexual, bisexual, etc. is innate, born within, not something they will be able to discuss at the “right time” or “when they are older” because most individuals realize it about themselves at a young age (Bastaman). So why do parents still refuse to talk about it to children at a young age regardless of scientific proof that is it not a “damaging lifestyle” or a “threat to the community”? It is because they were never exposed to these concepts. They do not understand what they do not know and therefore label certain actions or “choices” as wrong and immoral. After all, “the teacher's job is to empower students, through the teaching of interpretive skills, to become independent readers capable of finding viable meanings within the text” (Greenbaum 16).

It is important to make sure that children are exposed to as much as possible so that they can be knowledgeable of the world around them and have well informed opinions instead of the excuse of ignorance. According to James Blasingame, executive director of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, “Censoring books [which contain LGBTQ+ themes and material] allow teens to see themselves is evil. It sends the message to those kids that what they are is bad, and that their stories don’t matter.” LGBTQ+ youth are also at an increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide. According to multiple studies since the 1990s, suicide attempts are two to seven times

higher in high school students who identify as LGBTQ+ (Haas). Censoring material which discusses or even promotes acceptance is harmful to the mindsets of children who identify with this community. It not only impacts them but also those who do not identify with this group and may know nothing about LGBTQ+. Due to their ignorance they may make false statements that would be hurtful to those who do identify as LGBTQ+, and may label what they do not understand as wrong or immoral. This will cause their peers who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community to feel even more isolated and depressed, increasing the rift between subgroups and subcultures and straining the overall social sustainability of the school unit. Social sustainability calls for community cohesion for mutual benefit (Lewis). A town divided over the morality of a gay, bisexual, etc. “lifestyle” is the opposite of community cohesion and therefore will not promote social sustainability, bringing about a mutually beneficial outcome for the community as a whole. The longer the LGBTQ+ community feels isolated and cast out the harder it will be to create a mutually beneficial environment between these subgroups and subcultures.

Even though students are and should be free to express themselves on stage there is a line that must be drawn when discussing darker subject matter. There are some shows that should never see the light of day on a high school stage. David Harrower’s *Blackbird* is one of those shows. It is a ninety minute play about an adult’s man’s affair with a twelve year old girl. The two meet again fifteen years later and confront one another about their feelings, with the plot attempting to turn it into a dark repulsive love story (Oleksinski). According to a British newspaper, *The Guardian*, “It leaves marks – on the audience, who may find some moments almost unbearably painful to watch, and on the actors too, who appeared drained and devastated at the curtain call.” Stories such as this touch on dark themes that do not display a moral lesson in any manner. A play requires language, character development, plot, music and spectacle

(memorable). By these standards *Blackbird* is not even considered a play because it has little to not plot, a lack of character development and is memorable, not because it had a great lesson to tell but because its audience was scarred. Shows like this which attempt to shock and even horrify their audiences rather than teach them a valuable lesson should not be performed at a high school level. According to the teachings of Dr. Eric Trumbull, a university professor in Virginia, theater is an art for everyone. (Trumbull). Plays are an art form meant for the entertainment and education of its audiences regardless of age. A show such as *Blackbird* goes well beyond the bounds of something that is not “age appropriate.” The cruel reality shown in this story is an uncut, blunt tale about the reality of the world we live in today. However, it is not an art form; plays are meant for everyone, to not only tell a compelling story through movement and emotion but teach a lesson. “Art is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings” (Webster). According this criteria, *Blackbird* is not a piece of art. It is a nonfictional tale, which does not teach a moral lesson such a “stranger danger” but leaves the audience and performers alike feeling uncomfortable and disturbed.

It has also been proven scientifically that exposure leads to acceptance which can in turn promote a more cohesive, cooperative living environment. In 1903, Professor Max Meyer from the University of Missouri, performed an experiment to test attitudinal exposure as it pertains to music appreciation. He played oriental music for his students twelve to fifteen times in succession. Results from the study showed that students liked the pieces better on the last presentation than on the first (Meyer 209). Since the 1960s, scholars and scientists alike have tested what Robert Zajonc calls the “Mere-exposure Effect.” Zajonc himself conducted at least four experiments which provided an overwhelming amount of support for the hypothesis that mere repeated exposure of an individual to a stimulus object enhances his or her attitude toward



it. Since then there have been dozens of studies backing Zajonc's hypothesis: "Influence of Stimuli Perceived without Awareness on Social Behavior" (Bornstein 1970), "Consequences of Automatic Evaluation" (Chen and Bargh 2015), and "Trait and state Anxiety Reduction" (Ladd and Gabrieli 2012) just to name a few. Based on the evidence and over a hundred years of experiments and study, it is practically irrefutable that as humans, we tend to be more accepting of concepts and material based on familiarity. If exposure leads to acceptance, then the opposite is also true: a lack of exposure leads to a lack of acceptance. Theatre not only showcases many topics that would not likely be discussed otherwise but touches on them repeatedly so that students as well as other participants can learn, become familiar with, and likely be more accepting of certain concepts and realities. These are realities that some may still be hesitant to talk about openly, but it is reality and it is better to be well informed in order to make your own opinions rather than create false judgement or statements which could lead to students' embarrassment or being judged themselves.

Being involved in theatre will not only save them from embracing false statements but can expose young minds to different ideas and point of views they were possibly not aware of prior. Onstage Connecticut Columnist, Amanda Thomas, writes in her blog, "Censorship is a detrimental factor that is greatly affecting the advancement of American theatre in all regards. The fear of including nudity, blatant sexual content, and other controversial topics are affecting the minds and development of ideas in our society." The award winning musical, *Rent*, not only touches on loving yourself and the acceptance of the sexual orientation of others, but it also discusses how people should never take their loved ones for granted. It also talks about how you have to keep moving forward in order to survive and how it is hard to let go of the past. A character from *Rent*, Mark Cohen, a struggling filmmaker who was recently dumped, sings

bitterly, “How do you leave the past behind when it keeps finding ways to get to your heart? It reaches way down deep and tears you inside out 'til you're torn apart” (Larson). Quotes such as this come from shows that often teach many life lessons to its cast as well as its audience, touching on topics such as heartbreak and overcoming adversity. Students and audiences alike will never hear or see these lessons on stage because schools ban them, simply because among these life lessons, so-called “inappropriate content” is discussed. Another example of this would be *Avenue Q*, which discusses homosexuality and teaches the importance of individuality. It teaches audiences how important it is to appreciate the joy, and endure the sadness of the moment because time is fleeting. According to Rob Seitelman, the outreach director for Panorama Education and a writer for BroadwayHD, “Educational theatre can provide a powerful starting point for dialogue within an institution and its constituent community.” These plays are censored in schools because they discuss homosexuality along with other “degrading material.” These plays offer more than expanding the knowledge of young minds but teaching them valuable life lessons as well.

If people are not willing to talk about certain topics or practices then they certainly are not likely to be accepting of them. In theatre, students are exposed to topics that they may never hear about at home or at church. It is more important to be exposed at a young age than to be ignorant going into adulthood and making false statements that negatively impact both themselves and others. School productions do not disrupt the mission of the school, it is simply a creative outlet for students, which also provides them with a space to learn important life skills. The theatrical environment, not just the shows themselves, can teach minds young and old valuable lessons learned by working in the theatre. Positive collaboration promotes the sharing of different ideas and perspectives which in turn can help build a firm sense of community within a

theater. Participating in theatre also teaches the value of teamwork and collaboration. Debbie Otterstetter, President of the Stage 1 Theater in San Francisco, once stated, “You are working hard with new people to put on something that you’re proud of. That’s a great feeling.” The theater not only impacts those who participate but those in the audience as well; the more theaters talk about content deemed “inappropriate” through plays and musicals, the more they expose their audience, which turns into discussion, which leads to acceptance of these “new ideas” in the community that is no longer divided but a single, sustainable unit.

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