

Creating Intimacy and a Culture of Care at TFT

By Julia Ribas

A few days ago, Broadway legend Laura Benanti shared a heartbreaking post on Instagram disclosing some of the dangerous and harmful work conditions she endured throughout her career as a musical theatre performer. She described how her hesitancy to report these incidents led to several injuries, including a nearly fatal fall that caused her to break her neck back in 2002.

I encourage you to read her full post, which can be found [here](#). What struck me the most about her words was the notion that she was not granted the agency to voice her concerns for her own safety.

Growing up in community theatre and school drama programs, I've always considered theatre to be a safe space for me. One of the reasons I wanted to pursue a career in this field was because it was a place where I felt like my voice could be heard. Or at least, that's always what I thought theatre was supposed to be. After reading Benanti's post, I did some reflecting myself, and realized I could pinpoint several experiences as an artist when I felt uneasy and even unsafe.

Specifically, I remember attending a callback for a production of the musical *Spring Awakening* a couple years ago. If you are not familiar with this show, the two lead characters, Melchior and Wendla have several intense scenes, which include violence, some nudity, and simulated sex. Going into the audition process for the show, I was prepared for the possibility of having to engage with this kind of material if I were to be cast. All actors called back for the two leads had to read the scene where Melchior whips Wendla. I remember being surprised that we were doing that scene for callbacks, but because I was familiar with the content of *Spring Awakening*, I figured that this was necessary for the casting team to see.

When I arrived at the callback, I had a few minutes to run the scene with a partner before we performed for the audition panel. It wasn't until then, when there was another person acting with me—someone I'd never met before—that I realized I felt unsafe. Navigating the awkwardness of my scene partner asking, "uh, so, how do you want me to whip you?" was something I hadn't thought about. I'd imagine the creative team hadn't considered that either.

After trying a few things that didn't work, my partner and I agreed to simply reading the lines, without physically acting out the stage directions. For us, it was the only way that felt safe—in both a physical and emotional sense. The content of the scene was a whole other can of worms that we never unpacked before jumping right in. Though I came out of the audition physically unharmed, I feared that my hesitancy might work against me and keep me from getting cast.

Though I was nowhere near breaking my neck, I could resonate with Laura Benanti's experience of feeling like I had to compromise my boundaries to be liked, to book the role, to move my career forward.

A few months ago, I was able to attend a talkback with UCLA alum Milo Ventimiglia, who discussed his experience working in TV and Film. I had the opportunity to ask him the question that had been weighing on me not only since that callback, but since I had seriously considered entering the entertainment industry: How do you prioritize your values and boundaries when taking on acting jobs?

Particularly, **is there enough safe space for self-agency as an artist?**

In the era of the #MeToo movement, companies have been called to reevaluate harmful practices that put people, especially women, at risk. This is especially important in Theatre, Film, and TV, because artists have been challenged to ethically produce heavy and intense content, which can consequently impact how it is received by an audience.

Milo Ventimiglia responded to my question by mentioning the importance of an intimacy director on set, and how in scenes that deal with sexually charged material, having a trained mediator makes an incredible difference. Though there is much work to be done in making sure actors feel emotionally and physically safe in these circumstances, the idea of intimacy can cover a much broader range of themes.

As artists and collaborators, we need to be cautious and sensitive to every individual's needs and boundaries. Both actors and creative team members can start by reflecting on their own needs: what are you comfortable with? What are you not comfortable with? What are you only comfortable with under specific circumstances?

My mentor Carly D. Weckstein, a UCLA TFT alum, intimacy director, and sex educator, shared an Actor Boundaries worksheet that she created—it is a comprehensive list of activities that performers are often asked to do, both as actors and as employees of a project. It covers topics from physical boundaries, to heavy emotional experiences, to audience interaction, to stereotypical casting, to scheduling and time management. Reading through this list gave me a newfound awareness of so many elements of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health. There were things that I thought I would do unconditionally, but reconsidered—and conversely, I also looked deeper into things that would have been an automatic “no” from me.

Weckstein's worksheet can be found [here](#).

I encourage you, whether you're an actor or not, to check in with yourself using this survey. The worksheet also provides phrases to practice clear communication of your needs and boundaries.

Trauma reactions should be handled with the same level of care as a serious allergy. If one of our cast members is allergic to peanuts, they should be given the opportunity to alert us, and tell us how we can create a space that meets their health needs. Additionally, if the person is ever exposed to peanuts, we should know, for example, how an EpiPen works, who to contact, and most importantly, how to make sure our cast member is safe. Emotional triggers can be debilitating and dangerous, just like allergic reactions. Trained and experienced intimacy coordinators often facilitate the process of creating safe spaces and preparing for any situation when the space might become unsafe.

In a similar way, theatres should prepare their audiences for the content the production covers. Think of it as an “ingredients” label that includes any “allergens” that may cause a reaction from audience members. In our class meeting with Courtney Mohler, a theatre educator, dramaturg, and director, mentioned the importance of a content warning, a “disclosure of thematic events that may be emotionally distressing to a specific demographic group.” Mohler also explained how it is essential to constantly work towards “creating a culture of care.”

Let’s unpack that: A culture of care. This means that we should not only be hypersensitive to the health and wellbeing of others, but we need to create habits that facilitate a productive work environment. In entertainment, that responsibility extends beyond our cast and production team, because our work can impact large audiences and communities.

How do we introduce these practices into our theatre department at UCLA?

1. Full Disclosure

Everyone who wants to become involved in a project with TFT should be provided with resources about the production. This can include content warnings in audition notices, as well as full transparency in casting.

TFT students in our class have voiced their concerns about the lack of diversity in our department, and thus the tokenization of certain BIPOC actors in casting. Because of our limited casting pool, telling stories about BIPOC communities is challenging. However, there is a way to highlight BIPOC artists in our department without forcing anyone into a role that stereotypes their race or ethnicity. Again, I refer to Carly Weckstein’s worksheet, where she has actors evaluate:

“Would I consent to playing a role that stereotypes my _____ (gender, race, class, body, weight/size, sexuality, disability, mental illness, profession, etc.)?”

“Would I consent to playing a role that contributes to stereotyping a marginalized group?”

“Would I consent to being part of a project where I am the only _____ (BIPOC, woman, trans person, etc.) in the cast?”

“Would I consent to playing a role that explores (sexual, racialized, gender-based, medical, etc.) trauma?”

Giving agency to the actor or crew member—allowing them to choose to participate under previously disclosed circumstances—could contribute to creating that culture of care in our department.

2. Regular Maintenance

By hiring trained intimacy coordinators and experts in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), TFT can continue to nurture a productive environment for student artists. Recently TFT has been working with Carly Weckstein on several productions in order to facilitate important conversations about the kind of work we are producing. People like Carly help maintain a safe space in which students can communicate all of their health needs. Though it should be the responsibility of everyone involved to respect established boundaries, it could be beneficial to have a team of people to hold the group accountable.

3. Being Open to Growth

Though I can only speak to my own experience as a TFT student, I think our department is growing in a positive direction. I see more agency given to students—in the creation of this class, for example—as well as a push for hiring industry professionals who can facilitate essential conversations about racially-charged or intimate material. One of the strengths of our program is that as students learn, the department learns with us. Especially over the past year, I saw a great deal of effort from the faculty to self-educate, as well as provide space for students to voice their concerns about the department.

That being said, *we will mess up*. We will inevitably make mistakes. The entertainment industry is ever-changing, and it is our responsibility to engage with this change, not to fear it. Especially in an educational setting, where our purpose is to learn, we *should* dive into topics that are unknown and even uncomfortable. However, when we cross the line between *uncomfortable* and *unsafe*, we must be prepared to do the necessary work to rectify the situation and grow from it.

Growth is uncomfortable, but it is vital to our craft. As artists and students at UCLA TFT, we are called to “create what’s next.” But, we can only achieve this when we build a strong enough culture of care in our educational and theatrical spaces. If TFT is an airplane, we want to make sure all of our equipment is safe and up-to-date before we take off. And if something goes wrong while we’re in the air, we should have plenty of people onboard who will know how to protect our passengers and deliver us all to our destination.

Intimacy is more than just sex; it encompasses everything that demands vulnerability and trust. If TFT continues to prioritize fostering respect, safety, and the holistic well-being of the members of our department, we will not only create what's *next*, but we will create what's better than before.