

Abuse in the Arts: Decades of Neglect

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An artist's life is one of beauty, creation and even fame, and fortune. To an outside eye, the art industry appears to be glamorous and exciting, deeper still there is a darkness that has consumed the lives of countless performers and cost many artists the ultimate price. For decades, if not centuries, humans have not only tolerated abuse and neglect but in some cases even encouraged these types of unspeakable behaviors. Professionals in the arts have forged a system built on corruption, power, and exploitation, enabling abuse and creating a standard defined by a need to suffer and hurt in order to create “great art.” Performers of all ages and experience levels are exposed to these toxic and detrimental power dynamics and unreasonable expectations with the preconceived notion that mistreatment is just a part of the arts. This is unacceptable—the notion that artists should die for their art is unsustainable and inhumane. Art is meant to uplift life, not degrade and smother it.

Directors, designers, and other authority figures have long sustained unnecessary power thus creating an environment riddled with sexual, verbal, and physical abuse and allowing for the neglect of performers' mental health, establishing unreasonable standards, and creating an unhealthy workspace. In light of a rapidly increasing amount of abuse cases surfacing, in all tiers of theatres and companies, now is the time to address the issue and push harder than ever to eliminate the hierarchy of toxicity and prevent further neglect. In turn this deconstruction will allow space for and encourage the empowerment of victims.

There are multiple, prominent forms of abuse in theaters and performing arts schools, ranging from sexual, physical, and emotional. Many factors go into why a person becomes an abuser. In a large portion of cases, however, the reasoning is, sadly, power. Theatres are inherently structured in such a way that provides exceptional power to those at the top, including, but not limited to, directors and producers. Dr. Karen Morash, Ph.D. in Theatre and

Performance, explains why harassment is so commonplace in theatrical settings, “...there is a connection between structures of power and behavior that works to intimidate, silence, and punish.”¹ she goes on to reference that many theatres are moving towards a more collaborative style of production so as to eliminate these power dynamics, however according to her research, “...in practice most groups end up (formally or informally) reverting to a hierarchical structure, with the director and/or producer at the top of the hierarchy.”² As a result of this social scale, there is a great imbalance of power which allows for these directors and producers to manipulate and control performers without fear of consequences. Even the established performers do not have as much power as one would assume; they too fall victim to the hierarchy and oftentimes feel as if they cannot speak out. “The oversupply of labor means that many worry that if they speak out against abuse (of all kinds) they will lose opportunities for work.”³ The power dynamic combined with job insecurity, mental health, and many other factors creates an environment that strips actors of security and prevents many from feeling as if they are in a position to seek help. Contributing further to the issue of power dynamic is the dismissal of exploitation due to the “credibility” or social standing of the directors and producers. The hierarchy creates a mentality of insignificance amongst the actors alongside a sense of superiority among those in positions of power. This becomes especially apparent in the cases that are actually reported, though often dismissed in direct result of corruption. If the abuser is of a high status and the actor is particularly new they may ignore the plea, valuing the prestige of the abuser over the life of the victim. Too many people in the industry possess this outlook and would rather sweep these cases

¹ Morash, Karen. “Acting Unpleasantly: Why Harassment Is so Common in the Theatre.” *The Conversation*, March 13, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/acting-unpleasantly-why-harassment-is-so-common-in-the-theatre-87374>.

² Morash, “Acting Unpleasantly: Why Harassment”

³ Morash, “Acting Unpleasantly: Why Harassment”

under the rug in order to allow for these so-called “geniuses” in the arts to continue to work unchecked, while victims are left jobless and traumatized.

Beyond the overarching issue of hierarchy in the arts, the second biggest problem surrounds the social standards and preconceived notions about what it means to be an artist. Stefanie Maiya Lehmann, the business manager for the Lincoln Center of Performing arts in New York, writes about the problem of sexual harassment in theatres and how to begin addressing the situation. She brings up the major issue of artists being essentially taught that it is normal to receive harassment, abuse, and harsh criticism in the industry. That, in order to be a part of the art world, you just have to learn how to deal with and accept the mistreatment and abuse. She goes on to specify,

Theatre professionals would often be told that ‘to be in this business, you have to have a thick skin,’ hearing entreaties to ‘suck it up’ and ‘nobody likes a whiner,’ which wasn’t simply about dealing with artistic rejection, but also verbal abuse and sometimes physical abuse. Beliefs like this are a major contributing factor to the large number of unreported sexual harassment incidents.⁴

This promotes a mentality that abuse should not only be tolerated and dismissed but is considered normal and commonplace. Due to this assumption, thousands of cases go unreported, which in turn feeds into the aforementioned dilemma of power abuse, as this creates a sense of invulnerability in the abusers when the lack of reports results in minimal repercussions. When surveyed by *the Southern Theatre* over 80% of those who witnessed or experienced harassment did not report it, saying that they “felt I might be over-reacting.”⁵ This response stems from the feelings of invalidation resulting from the forced tolerance ingrained in nearly every single performer at some point in their career. These feelings then allow for even more blurred lines

⁴ Lehmann, Stefanie Maiya, and Celeste Morris. “Southern-Theatre-2018-Fall.pdf.” Southern Theatre, (2018), 9.

⁵ Lehmann & Morris. “Southern-Theatre pdf,” 10

due to the informality of work conditions in many theatres. Oftentimes artists meet under non-traditional circumstances in non-conventional workspaces, such as a coffee shop for consultation on a script, or for additional rehearsals in the director's apartment. This can create a gray zone as to what boundaries are still in place: are the codes of conduct still established outside of the walls of the traditional rehearsal space? Can the rules of a theatre protect performers from workplace abuse if they are in these unusual locations? The New York Public Theatre commented on this exact dilemma stating “because the spaces in which we work are broad, encompassing administration, auditions, rehearsals, technical work, late nights, parties, public-facing frontline work and more, we must acknowledge, and not exploit, the blurred boundaries between work and social spaces.”⁶ This addresses the problem by stating that these “blurred boundaries” cannot be utilized to enable and allow for abuse and neglect. So as to protect the integrity of the art and the safety of the performers and all those involved, the production must be handled with strict codes of conduct and understanding regardless of the informality of the setting.

In order to maintain a system that forces the abused to remain silent, the abusers often begin to manipulate and coerce artists from childhood into this mindset that these practices are standard in all workspaces. The incidences surrounding child abuse in theatres are some of the most common as they involve multiple kinds of abusers, including pedophiles and predators, preying on the young and impressionable and developing a cycle that continues on for generations of abuse. A prominent example of these crimes was highlighted by a recent lawsuit into the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis. Former MPR reporter Marianne Combs exposed the dark history of the theatre company in a heartbreaking piece detailing the abuse spanning decades. A majority of the abuse cases involved the artistic director, however, more

⁶ Lehmann & Morris, 10

than twenty abusers were named, including company actors and other professionals. The children involved, now grown adults, spoke on why they felt this abuse went on unchecked for so many years, illustrating the severity of the gaslighting that occurs in theatres and enables the continuation of harassment. When interviewed, they spoke of the corruption, “survivors described a system of isolation and manipulation that preyed on the vulnerable and shamed them into silence.”⁷ They were forced into circumstances that would isolate them and create a dynamic that promoted obedience or suffered the consequences threatened by the abusers. These methods even extended to threatening the parents in order to maintain power responding with coercion such as, “Well, if you want your kid to be a professional, this is what you’re going to have to do”⁸ when asked about the conditions of employment. These techniques were utilized in order to coerce and manipulate all those involved fostering an extremely hostile and dangerous work environment. Due to the severity of the situation and the deeply ingrained power dynamics, almost every case went unreported, “Those who experienced it say the abuse was so widespread it felt pointless to try and report it.”⁹ The children and parents involved assumed nothing could be done and grew hopeless, becoming conditioned to believe that this was simply the standard and in thereby complicit in the system of enablers. This type of compliance is actually so common in cases of abuse that there is a psychological term for such behaviors. Conceptualized by American psychologist, Martin E.P. Seligman in the 1960’s the theory of “learned helplessness” has become a basic principle of behavioral theory, defined within Encyclopedia Britannica as “a mental state in which an organism forced to bear aversive stimuli, or stimuli that

⁷ Combs, Marianne. “Innocence Lost: A Culture of Abuse.” MPR News. MPR News, 2019. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2019/10/07/innocence-lost-childrens-theatre-abuse-survivors-justice>.

⁸ Combs. “Innocence Lost: A Culture”

⁹ Combs.

are painful or otherwise unpleasant, becomes unable or unwilling to avoid subsequent encounters with those stimuli, even if they are ‘escapable,’ presumably because it has learned that it cannot control the situation.”¹⁰ In other words, the response of the families and children involved was completely substantiated by the psychology of the circumstances. They felt so deeply powerless that they subconsciously accepted defeat due to their conditioning by the abusers. This theory also helps to explain how the abuse continues between generations, as they learn these methods and are led to believe that such tactics are normal and standard, therefore creating a future dynamic of abuse once the children grow up. Combs continues on to discuss the cyclical nature of the abuse, writing that several of the children who suffered abuse ended up working at the Children's Theatre as adults and becoming abusers themselves.¹¹ In result of repeated grooming and manipulation, the children grew up not truly comprehending the crimes that they suffered and in turn became the very adults they so feared. She finalizes her statements with a comment on the overall culture of the theatre stating, “As a whole, survivors’ stories reveal that John Clark Donahue fostered a highly sexualized and permissive culture that attracted other abusers and emboldened increasingly sexual and violent behavior by staff and students.”¹² This point further illustrates, how significant a role an imbalanced power dynamic, can create upon an environment. It demonstrates the ways in which power dynamics can embolden abusers while belittling victims. This puts into perspective the reality of the situation and sheds light on why so many children can then grow up to be adult performers that continue perpetuating these outdated and intolerable standards.

¹⁰ Jeannette L Nolen , “Learned Helplessness,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), <https://www.britannica.com/science/learned-helplessness>.

¹¹ Combs.

¹² Combs.

Abuse in the theatre, however, is not always so blatant and direct. In addition to the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that many performers suffer through daily, many artists also deal with the neglect of proper safety precautions. This is abusive in itself, as it can result in harm to the artists mental and physical health. Actors often find themselves in circumstances that call for varying levels of vulnerability and intimacy. Performers are tasked with simulating some of the most difficult human emotions, with common techniques being emotional recall and method acting, in order to achieve the headspace and truthfulness needed for these roles. In addition to the emotional vulnerability required of artists, many shows and performances involve intimacy ranging from stage combat work to sexual/romantic scenes, and sometimes nudity. When handled properly and professionally, these practices are relatively innocuous and performers are able to function healthily in a safe and supportive workspace. However, this is quite often not the case. Many performers do not go through formal training, and even fewer of those who do, actually receive lessons on intimacy and mental health precautions. This is problematic as improper techniques can lead to severely compromising the mental health of the performers. The lack of understanding by performers then creates an environment that abusers are quick to take advantage of. This form of abuse is often overlooked because the performers usually do not know any better or are too frightened to question the situation for fear that they are overreacting. Abusive directors will take advantage of these vulnerabilities and use their power and status to manipulate performers into uncomfortable and unsafe situations. This is extremely dangerous as it is one of the most common, but minimally addressed, issues within productions and serves as a gateway to more severe forms of abuse. This issue is especially prevalent with younger/newer performers as they feel required to oblige all of the requests of

their directors, especially when they are more prolific in their field; the actors feel as if they are inferior due to the reputation of the director, which leads to their silence when lines are crossed.

Actors have an exceptionally difficult career path, between the performance anxiety, job insecurity, and emotionally taxing requirements, it is no wonder so many performers battle with mental illnesses and other health conditions. Once you factor in the additional emotional and physical trauma of abuse, it becomes clear for what reasons many have left the industry permanently. The true psychological impacts, however, are not always obvious, and sadly they are often not acknowledged until it is too late. Over the past several decades, numerous celebrity performers have come forward to talk about their battles with mental health. Many of them suffer from anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and forms of depression, with a large contributor to these illnesses being a history of abuse. The emotional and physical scars of abuse can last a lifetime, having both immediate and long-term impacts on the survivors. In an industry entirely based on emotional vulnerability and intimacy, it seems that there would be more emphasis on protecting workers from these types of risks. Performers are already more susceptible to mental illnesses because of the unusual circumstances surrounding their career requirements. Leith Taylor Ph.D. in performing arts writes about the mental health struggles of actors in the industry—referencing a 2015 study, she explains, “Performers are twice as likely as the general population to experience depression.”¹³ Actors already have a higher likelihood of experiencing mental illness than the average person, making them especially susceptible to the forms of abuse most present in the arts. It is no secret that abusers often prey on those they see as more vulnerable. They target those who they feel will be easier to manipulate and coerce, often

¹³ Taylor, Leith. “Out of Character: How Acting Puts a Mental Strain on Performers.” *The Conversation*, June 3, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/out-of-character-how-acting-puts-a-mental-strain-on-performers-86212>.

utilizing points of insecurity, including mental illnesses. This only serves to worsen the condition of the victim and makes them even more susceptible to future abuse. This is also a major factor in the cyclical nature of abuse. As previously mentioned, this is shown when the lasting emotional damage creates a mentality that turns the victim into an abuser themselves. This then serves to feed the cycle of abusers and illustrates how the crimes continue. The encouragement by directors to push boundaries without proper techniques or methodology with the knowledge that these tactics may be detrimental to the health of an actor is abusive in itself. By allowing performers to continue to compromise their emotional and physical health for the art, professionals are prioritizing the quality of a performance over the quality of a human life. They are not only abusing the workers by compromising their safety in the moment, but additionally compromising their future mental health as they are forcing them into a vulnerability that could expose them to further abuse and manipulation.

In order to address the issue there needs to be a fundamental understanding of each of these layers, and multiple methodologies must be put into place so as to ensure the most thorough solution. As discussed, one of the greatest contributors to abuse in the theatre is an unhealthy power dynamic coupled with outdated standards of tolerance. There are multiple necessary ways to handle and respond to this, with a combination of methodologies being the best approach. The first step is acknowledging the problem. This seems relatively simple, but it is quite shocking how many theatre companies and schools refuse to apologize for, or even recognize, the functional hierarchy they have established which enables and promotes abuse. Many seasoned professionals would rather continue to neglect their workers so as to maintain outdated practices as they feel it is simply the way things have always been done. By forcing companies and schools to claim accountability for fostering these negative workspaces, they are

drawing attention to the issue and acknowledging that they can and will be held accountable. This additionally helps victims feel as if they have a stronger basis for accusations and need not remain in a system of neglect. This not only increases awareness but is integral to creating and enforcing individual codes of conduct for each workplace. In order to establish these harsh boundaries and protocols they must first be willing to address and acknowledge that the issue is still painfully present. Every workplace needs boundaries, codes of conduct and explicit consequences for violations. If not established from the start, abusers can and will take advantage of any and every loophole available. No person, regardless of their profession, should feel as if their safety and quality of life is irrelevant. Regardless of the career path, there are boundaries that should never be considered acceptable to cross. There are numerous resources available to help build a foundation and create these boundaries, and Lehmann continues to discuss these resources, providing information on the “Chicago Theatre Standards,” a widely accepted and credible document detailing “specific goals and standards for numerous activities, such as auditions, dressing rooms and the choreography of nudity and violence. It also offers several sample templates.”¹⁴ This is just one example of formally credited documentations and methods for creating a healthy work environment. She then goes on to explain how other theatres have utilized this resource and built off of it for individual needs. Every single theatre and every single show is unique, therefore the code of conduct must be subject to adjustment depending on the needs. She references a Florida theatre’s revision of their policies surrounding sexual harassment in light of their production of *Hair*, a show that involves a great deal of nudity. She quotes Venice Theatre’s assistant director of education and outreach, ““We wanted [our final version] to be one that was not just revised from a larger prominent document, but one we could stand

¹⁴ Lehmann & Morris, 14

behind as an organization to make sure everyone working with us felt supported.’’¹⁵ The company accessed these resources and adjusted and added to them in order to create a unique system that they felt supported their performers, technicians, other workers, and individual productions best. They sought to create a healthy workspace for everyone involved, and by doing so, formed an all-encompassing, beneficial plan for the company as a whole. There are numerous other resources as well; Lehmann, paraphrasing the Human Resources for the Arts method, explains the need to establish a basic foundation for safer practices, starting with: creating an accountable and clear harassment policy, as well as grief procedures. This would serve as a clear process for reporting incidences and establishing the stance of zero-tolerance through the highest ranking figurehead from the start of every production.¹⁶ Once these methods are implemented, there is a clear course of action for every and any incident, and each theatre can expand and amend their policies to better protect their workers. This also takes away the sense of voicelessness and insignificance for the performers so they can feel safe and secure in reporting harassment and abuse. This also serves to dismantle the hierarchy by creating a power distribution and a checks and balances system for those who hold traditionally powerful positions. The implementation of a zero-tolerance policy would eliminate the invulnerability many highly esteemed directors and producers feel they possess, and enforces a system that anyone, regardless of rank, will be held completely accountable for their actions and the consequences.

The necessity of a safer work environment should be a number one priority in every single career and every single industry. The fundamentals of theatre production need to be revised and action must be taken in order to establish safer, workable conditions. The

¹⁵ Lehmann & Morris, 14

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implementation of clear and strictly enforced codes of conduct, as well as providing more education and resources to performers and other professionals is absolutely necessary to start taking those steps towards dismantling the corrupt system. By taking action to eliminate these power imbalances and outdated standards, theatres would be taking major steps towards eradicating the toxicity and abuse that is all too common in the arts. The process is difficult and takes some time, but the sheer significance is evident from the ever-present number of reported, and unreported, cases. In order for the industry to continue to prosper and advance it must commit to the necessary growth to create impactful art free of harassment, manipulation, exploitation, neglect and abuse.

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