

OPEN SPACE

Wednesday 8th November 2017

Session 3: LION

How do we, in the West Midlands, respond to the Statement released by Vicky Featherstone and the Royal Court concerning recent allegations of Sexual Harassment in the Theatre Sector.

A precis of conversations around this subject. Convenor: Graeme Rose

On the heels of recent allegations / press revelations levelled at senior industry figures, relating to historic incidents of sexual harassment, and the dismissal of individuals from duties in the subsidised sector, Royal Court Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone convened at short notice a gathering of Industry professionals in London to discuss ways in which the Industry can move forward in order to prevent future harassment and abuses of power.

A result of that event hosted by the Royal Court was a Press statement and drafted 'Code of Conduct', acknowledged as "a start". The link to this is below.

Press Release:

<https://d19lfjg8hluhfw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/06173403/Vicky-Featherstone-Announces-Code-of-Behaviour-to-Prevent-Sexual-Harassment-and-Abuses-of-Power1.pdf>

The issue of Sexual Harassment in the workplace has had a significant impact in the last weeks, largely owing to the courage and conviction of many who have been able to share their experiences through the #metoo tag. It felt important that today's Open Space session acknowledge this as a live-issue impacting on our sector.

The conversation is a sensitive, and highly emotive one and there is an awareness of a dearth of male voices in the conversation. This session was convened in the knowledge that an upcoming Devoted & Disgruntled session is scheduled to discuss in greater detail the ramifications of the allegations and the Press statement; details of which are available through this link:

<https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/Event/dd-satellite-sexual-abuse>

The conversation acknowledges that it is important and vital to talk about these issues if they arise, and to create an environment in which individuals can have the confidence to speak up if they need.

The Old School rhetoric of "that's just how it is" needs to be interrogated and dismantled, offering young people an alternative stance to the normalisation of habitual abuse, however

low-key, which conflates language-power-sex in a way which can make people feel uncomfortable, bullied or belittled. The #metoo campaign has helped with the “ripping off of the mask”.

Societal structures are deep-rooted and “both sides” are institutionalised; perpetrator and victim, which both need interrogating. Eg. Those who have suffered these behaviours from others often feel guilt at having to shrug off comments or tolerate unacceptable behaviour. The conversation acknowledges that it is better to be active and engaged than tolerant and disengaged, though this is easily said. Broadly speaking the perpetrators may be in a position of exercising greater power and influence over perhaps younger and less experienced colleagues, who are fearful of losing employment opportunities or having professional reputations tarnished.

Low-level harassment may have a cumulative effect, and may not be acknowledged until too late. Guilt may be a residual of not admitting it early enough. Although predominantly perceived of as female-as-victim, sexual harassment is not exclusively this. Sexism – homophobia – bullying can affect all.

A story from a male perspective helps to illuminate how readily someone in a position of power and authority (working for a ACE subsidised organisation) can attempt to extend his influence to bully another individual and manipulate a working environment. In the retelling of this particular story the psychological impact of this encounter has a lasting effect, a decade on. The story illustrates how damage continues to impact on us. It begs the question, is there a bigger problem within the bigger institutions?

Some individuals will have been put off and will have left the Industry as a result of these behaviours.

Calling it out – with the suggested phrase of the Code of Conduct document – “THAT IS NOT APPROPRIATE – IT MAKES ME FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE”

- But, according to one female in the conversation, This doesn't work. Citing a recent experience in a work meeting with an otherwise older, all-male gathering in which her body was commented upon.

One alternative is to sit it out and wait until they all die off! Fatalistic but acknowledging that it may be more fitting to spend energy enlightening the next generation by preparing them for future employment standards.

We need to circulate the Code of Conduct and bring it to a greater number of individuals and organisations attention. Organisations should staple it to the Office wall, and induct new staff members and collaborators. Freelancers may be particularly vulnerable as they are attached on a short-term basis.

A pledge based on the document?

Does Britishness have any factor to play? Question of tactile behaviours in the theatre.

At what point does touch become unwelcome?

It may be down to Intentionality. But “it is still possible to be flirtatious and mutually respectful”. Uncomfortable truth that in certain sectors of the industry sexuality is a factor / currency that some use to find employment opportunities. Diligence and responsibility must be considered by those who are in a position of power.

Downloadable Code of Behaviour:

<https://d19lfjg8hluhf.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/06174357/A-Code-of-Behaviour-6Nov.pdf>

Graeme Rose