

To Blow or Not To Blow? Thoughts about self-censorship

By Sunny Drake

I hover back stage waiting to start my one man show, "X", in a small Canadian city, population 20,000. As far as I know, this is the first show by a trans artist programmed in the theatre's main season and it may also be the first with explicitly queer content. The theatre is almost full – 250 mostly straight folks shuffle in their seats as I burst onto the stage. The audience are quick to warm and pretty soon we are having a fab night together and rapidly becoming BFFs.

And then I get to *that point* in the show. I've been dreading this ever since the show was booked over a year ago. It's the part where my character gives a blow job to his priest in a church confession booth. In many queer contexts, this is a fun and cheeky section but not particularly shocking, especially given the blow job is to an imaginary character and there's not even a banana involved. Despite being nervous, I'm determined to go ahead with the scene unchanged but by mid-show, my resolve wavers. I sneak a peak out to the audience. They are leaning towards me, their faces delightfully open. They're in love with the puppets and the animation and the quirky characters - we are connecting. And in that moment, my desire to feel connected, to be having a smooth conversation and to be liked presses in on me and I freak out and skip the blow job. Later, my Stage Manager tells me that the straight tech guys were super bummed – they'd been eagerly anticipating the blow job the entire way through the script.

So was it a big deal that I self-censored that scene? On the one hand, my performances are not aimed at shock for shock's sake. I aim to have conversations with my audiences about things which I find important - to reflect current realities and envisage new possibilities. Sometimes that might mean shocking them, other times serenading or seducing them. The blow-job felt somewhat peripheral in the work – it wasn't a key plot point or integral to the emotional resonance or theme of the show. But sex was nonetheless an important part of the life and world of the character. How many details could I strip back before my characters become skeletons devoid of the flesh of life? Before they become, well, straight?

The Artistic Director of the theatre told me she'd been a little nervous about how people would respond to the work, but she'd booked it to challenge her audience. After the show, she got calls from even some of her more conservative audience members saying how much they'd loved the show. Would they have loved it with the blow job? Is it important that they loved it? Would the blow job have alienated some of the audience members who were already working hard to meet me in a place unfamiliar to them? By trying to connect with the majority, did I fail to connect more deeply with the few queers who wouldn't otherwise have gotten to see their smutty sides reflected on stage?

In the bigger scheme of things, to blow or not to blow in that particular case may not have been that important. What concerns me more is the potential for these small self-censorships to sneakily slide into more significant ones. An edited out peripheral blow-job here or there could slide to *“that character will be more*

relatable if they're a banker instead of a sex worker" or "probably one gay character is enough" and then "let's just put on Romeo & Juliet, shall we?"

It's bad enough when others censor our work, but self-censorship presents a different set of dangers like the potential to forget who we actually are. I don't want to wake up one day so stripped back that I am unable to recognize myself or my community. There's also a danger in becoming fixated on particular gains and then losing sight of bigger dreams by censoring ourselves down to only the aspects of ourselves deemed acceptable at any given time. I don't want my right to kiss a man in public to be dependent on embracing only monogamy. I refuse to be respected as a trans man conditional upon being a straight and masculine trans man. I don't want my right to support as a sober queer to mean drug using queers get thrown under the bus. I want to get to bring my whole self and my whole imagination to my life and also my theatre work.

Having said that, I don't think all self-censorship is inherently bad. I'll give another example where I was completely fine with changing a few parts in my work. The tour stop immediately after the *to blow or not to blow* incident was in a 2,000 person town. I found out on the day of the show that the local high school wanted to bring two classes along, so I took out the blow job and made two minor changes to the text to make it more school appropriate. It was the first play that most of the students had ever seen. They lingered after the show and we chatted about drinking and sobriety (some of the content of the show) and how they wanted to make a play about the stigma they face as young Indigenous people in the North. In this case, even though I didn't originally make the show with young audiences in mind, when the opportunity presented itself to me, I felt it more important to engage the students than to do the blow job. For me, the compromise of my integrity would have been to *refuse* to adapt the show and therefore miss my chance to have these significant connections.

Another way I want to challenge myself is to respect the intelligence of my audiences. I've done trans and queer education work for over a decade and have learned that the over-simplified 101 conversation and content can not only throw a lot of people under the bus, it can also prevent people from more quickly grasping complex situations. I find the 201 conversation can often be a better entry point. This is likely why I've found broader audiences often interested in work that I have made with a trans and queer audience in mind because I'm presenting more nuance and complexity, some of which may go over their heads, but a lot of which surprisingly sinks in.

As well as underestimating their intelligence, in self-censoring I've likely also made incorrect assumptions about what straight, non-trans audiences are interested in. Amongst other things, my assumptions are informed by my own internalized crap – those delightful messages about queerness that seep under the skin about being unlovable and sick, you know the ones? These sneaky messages shape my predictions of what audiences will and won't be able to stomach. I think a significant chunk of so called "mainstream" audiences are sick of the bland theatre served up to them. I think many are hungry for out of the box work. The audience I described earlier would probably have talked about the

blow job for years! And the audience members that walk out – who knows what their trajectory will be from there?

I think we can learn deeply from looking at LGBTIQ rights movements. For instance, the more radical beginnings of queer and trans rights movements in North America have largely been mainstreamed. Take the iconic Stonewall riots - started by trans women of colour and sex workers – an early movement catalyst which had a radical and grassroots agenda including addressing police violence, poverty and trans women’s safety. The movements then got taken over by white middle class cis (non-trans) men who became increasingly invested in presenting a “respectable” image to the mainstream - *“Hi I’m Bill – I’m a very masculine banker, and this is my (monogamous) husband Bob – he’s a very masculine lawyer. Look, we’re just like you, isn’t that wonderful!”* This greatly changed the agendas of the movements.

What lessons can we learn for our theatre making? I think we have to be brave enough to be un-liked and criticized by the mainstream, yet also cautious of striving to be popular within queer subcultures purely through being unpopular with the mainstream. Sometimes I believe in a fully uncensored “fuck you, I’m not even having a conversation with you” and making work aimed just at our own communities – whatever race/class/gender/sexuality intersections that might include. I don’t believe in this idea of “preaching to the choir” – I think queer and trans audiences deserve nuanced work that holds up a mirror to our lives and stretches our imaginations beyond the reflection. Other times I want to be engaged with broader communities and I’m trying to figure out how to do that whilst maintaining the integrity of my work when there’s so much pressure to normalize content, aesthetic and form. When I look back on a piece of mine from 9 years ago about my family and trans-ness – now what I see is a dramaturgical mess. I’d already been making performances and theatre for a while but having never been to theatre school, I really had no idea about “play structure”. Yet there was something so beautifully queer about the work – probably for exactly that reason. And it struck emotional resonances with queer and trans audiences across Australia and North America. It also surprised me that a number of broader audiences strongly connected to the work too. I think many audiences will prioritize connected stories over dramaturgical merit. Many will take rawness and realness over sterile production quality.

Given that many audiences may respond better to uncensored queer work than what we might imagine, a key challenge is how to get past the resource gate keepers, particularly presenters. I’ve toured to over 80 theatres, festivals and other venues in 55 cities across North America, Europe and Australia. Through this I’ve become convinced that theatre presenters (more so than festivals) are more conservative than their audiences. They are often incredibly risk averse, trying to keep their theatres afloat during difficult financial times. I’ve been the General Manager of an arts company – I know those challenges are real. I have had some great experiences with bold presenters like the presenter I described earlier on. And others like an Australian theatre in a small city last year who were determined to present my work even after a number of their audience unsubscribed from their Facebook page in protest over the trans/queer content.

And another presenter who persisted even after the venue they tried to hire refused because of my identity and content. Incidentally, in all of these places, the audience response to the shows were outstanding. The slices of audiences that protest queer and trans content don't necessarily represent the rest of the audiences. I think generally presenters underestimate the capacity of their audiences to be able to enjoy, relate to or be stretched by queer work. If I had a dollar for every audience member who told me *"I never thought I'd be able to relate to someone like you"* then I'd be such a wealthy independent artist that I might even hit minimum wage (lol). So how do we work with presenters and learn to advocate for our work in ways that encourage them to take risks?

Alternatively, how do we form our own presenting networks? I tour my work outside of theatre spaces with my own tourable mini-lighting set up so I can retain some production quality. This way I can perform in town halls, warehouses and other spaces where my audiences or DIY presenters are able to access. I'd love to connect with other doing similar things, and work together to upskill DIY presenters in how to present theatre.

I'm re-looking at the panel topic and really, I have a lot more questions than answers. Here are a few more questions I'd love to see us discussing on this panel:

- How do we address the massive power imbalances in whose stories get told and who gets resources to create? How can we support the leadership of queers of colour and trans people – particularly trans women of colour, within an industry that is heavily white and cis dominated?
- Whilst coming out narratives are important, how can we support nuanced work that goes way beyond that and explores the rest of our lives?
- How can we support the sort of work that's being made underground at backyard clothing swaps, living rooms and open mics, without sucking the life out of through mainstreaming it?