

# **The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations**

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**An overview of a survey on abuse and  
discrimination in the community of the  
Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy  
of Dramatic Art in Warsaw**

# The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations

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The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw  
Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam, DAS Graduate School Conservatoire  
National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris  
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## **Authors**

dr hab. Julia Kubisa, prof. UW  
dr hab. Mikołaj Lewicki  
dr Justyna Kościńska  
mgr Katarzyna Rakowska  
mgr Feliks Tuszko

## **Overview author**

Katarzyna Szaniawska

## **Introduction by**

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek

## **Comments**

Hilary Jones  
Bernhard Siebert  
Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca

## **Research team**

mgr Witold Chyło  
mgr Marta Gospodarczyk  
dr Justyna Kościńska  
dr hab. Julia Kubisa, prof. UW  
dr hab. Mikołaj Lewicki  
dr Adam Ostolski  
mgr Alicja Palęcka  
dr Wojciech Rafałowski  
mgr Katarzyna Rakowska  
mgr Katarzyna Słaby  
mgr Kamil Trepka  
mgr Feliks Tuszko

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# **Introduction**

# Introduction

We would like to present you with a synthetic English-language summary of the report “The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations. The Experience of Studying and Working at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw”. The entirety of this extensive publication, which was written as a result of a sociological survey of the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw and its branch in Białystok in 2021/2022, has been made available in the original Polish. The study was conducted at the request of the Academy’s leadership by a research team from the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Warsaw under the supervision of Prof. Julia Kubisa and Prof. Mikołaj Lewicki. The report was intended to provide an in-depth diagnosis of the phenomena of abuse, discrimination and personal boundary violations in the didactic process at the Academy; to identify the scale of inappropriate actions, indicate and explain their causes at the level of individuals and organizational culture; and, lastly, to give recommendations for change.

It is worth to point out the circumstances in which and the reasons why the Academy’s leadership decided to invite the University of Warsaw researchers to work so profoundly with our school’s community. The direct impulse for action was a callout by actor Anna Paliga in March 2021, in which she described extreme transgressions committed at the Łódź Film School, and the subsequent wave of testimonies by alumni of all theater and film schools in Poland – including the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw. This clearly indicated a serious, structural problem of abuse and discrimination in the entire Polish system of post-secondary theater schools. The news of mistreatment and the expressed need for change did not come as a surprise to us. The Academy had been taking consistent action towards the improvement of its students’ safety since 2018. It was the first among state theater schools to prohibit traditional hazing (Polish: *fuksówka*), introduce the Code of Ethics and establish the

position of a Student Ombudsperson. When Anna Paliga spoke out, the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw had been running a cycle of trainings on emotional abuse prevention and mobbing prevention for its entire community. It was a custom-made program that responded specifically to the problems observed at the Academy. Because mandatory training for the teaching staff included a sixteen-hour workshop in small groups, it became an opportunity for in-depth work and discussion, allowing the participants to learn practical tools for increasing safety during the teaching/learning process. The involvement of ADA's management in the process is attested by the fact that its rector Prof. Wojciech Malajkat participated in every workshop for lecturers, engaging in the most significant debate to date on the ways of teaching as well as the challenges and difficulties that our school has been facing with regard to safety and quality of education.

Nevertheless, the scale of the public debate started by Anna Paliga motivated us to take further restorative and transformative steps. In response to the recognized shortcomings and challenges, we acted in four main directions: development of new assessment and feedback standards; creation of a comprehensive anti-mobbing and anti-discrimination procedure, including establishment of a complaints commission and the position of an Employee Ombudsperson; introducing tools and procedures for safe creative work with intimacy; conducting an in-depth sociological study on the phenomenon of abuse and discrimination at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw and its scale.

Working groups consisting of the teaching staff and students of all majors were formed in order to develop new procedures and regulations. All of the solutions introduced came together as a cohesive system, laid out in an Internet guide for the Academy's community, called Bezpieczni (Polish: [We Are] Safe): <http://akademia.at.edu.pl/bezpieczni/>. We are now at the stage of testing the implemented innovations, looking at how the solutions operate and continuing to discuss the subject. In April 2022, we launched a two-year grant project Bezpieczna przestrzeń. Dobre praktyki i narzędzia służące transformacji kształcenia teatralnego [A safe space. Good practices and tools to transform theater education], co-financed by the Ministry of Education and Science under the program Science for Society. It has allowed us to implement a systematic evaluation of the new solutions as well as to fund training on safe intimacy work tools for students and teachers. As part of the grant, we will also prepare curricula and scripts for innovative subjects that will be taught at the Academy: Creative Work with Intimacy in Theater and Film and Ethics in the Theater.

Without a doubt, the transformative process at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw is very dynamic. The report we are presenting has shown that we were able to correctly identify key areas for intervention and change, including first and foremost feedback and assessment methods as well as creative work with intimacy. The knowledge we subsequently acquired through the sociological survey has allowed us to see the difficult aspects of studying and working at the Academy in an objective and systematic manner, and to set the course for further transformative action. What kind of an image of our school emerges from the material that the researchers gathered? As a person who has been deeply involved in the transformative process at the Academy and, more broadly, in the Polish theater for several years, I see clear reasons for optimism. One very heartening fact is that the vast majority of our community identifies with the transformative process, with similar proportions observed among the students and the teaching staff. Asked whether the changes were an opportunity to improve the situation at the ADA, 86% of the community responded “yes”, while 80% of women and 88% of men agreed that the changes were “difficult but necessary”. Although we differ in our detailed assessment of the required scale and areas of change, 78% of women and 67% of men believe that the changes do not “encroach on the essence of the studies” at the Academy. Most also agree that the pace and extent of the changes are appropriate. Combined with the high level of trust in our school’s leadership and the respondents’ considerable awareness of the new solutions, this constitutes an image of a community which participates in the transformative process in an open and deliberate manner, agrees on the principal direction of the changes and is ready to take on challenges in the name of improving safety and interpersonal relationships.

Certainly, the report has also shed light on the discrimination and inappropriate behavior that have taken place in the Academy, usually in classes and against students. Although drastic violations do not tend to happen (the study has not discovered any extreme forms of sexual harassment or violation of corporal integrity), the unspoken rules of communication at the Academy are a serious issue. They may lead to public humiliation, name-calling, ridiculing, sarcastic remarks or belittling jokes as well as criticism that is personal rather than constructive and is aimed at a person’s physical or personality features or attitude. The commonplace acceptance for emotional outbursts, including raised voices, yelling, profanity, violent gestures, entering someone’s personal space, touching without warning, which happen within a hierarchical student–teacher relationship rather than the one of equality and reciprocation, causes intense stress among students and entails high

emotional and physical costs. Changing this state of affairs poses a great challenge because the communication mechanisms described in the study are in fact prevalent throughout the Polish theater environment. Brutalization of language intersects with an official and unofficial hierarchy, which determines interpersonal relationships, dividing the community into the privileged – people who can permit themselves to do most (if not all) things they feel like doing – and those forcibly subordinated to them.

However, even in this regard, the report offers reasons for cautious optimism. The experiences of students who were nearing graduation and those who were still in their first years differed considerably. Throughout their course of studies, inappropriate behavior by teachers was experienced much more frequently by senior students than junior ones, including: impulsive responses towards a particular person (36% among older students, 13% among younger students), yelling at a person (38% and 11%, respectively), sarcastic remarks (57% and 24%), and ridicule towards someone's appearance (23% and 9%) or lack of skill (26% and 4%). Evidently, the difference is significant, amounting to a decrease by over two-thirds in some categories! These comparisons, I believe, capture the change happening at the Academy of Dramatic Art as a result of the action we have been taking since 2019. Why should our optimism be cautious, then? First, these highly inappropriate phenomena still occur, albeit with lesser intensity. Second, we cannot be sure whether the change recorded by the survey is lasting. Third, the survey has shown a change, but it also revealed the difficult experiences lived by the students who have recently graduated. The ambivalence felt at this knowledge is reflected in a statement by a fifth-year student quoted in the report: "We're simply proud participants in this change, which is so damn necessary. It's a pity it started so late".

The report also identified some main forms of discrimination at the ADA, whose scale is worrisome, namely the gender-based discrimination of women and the discrimination of students who pursue Theatre Studies – the theory major offered at the Academy – and majors related to puppetry. These phenomena, too, are deeply rooted in the Polish theater in general (i.e., the intra-institutional hierarchy and a hierarchy between different forms of theater), and even – when it comes to the gender-based discrimination – in the Polish society as a whole. Changing these relationships represents a great challenge for the entire theater environment, which should now develop a new code of communication and new collaboration practices, incorporating the real empowerment and safety of all participants in didactic, artistic and production processes.



The report we are presenting is a pioneering one. Never before has a similar document been prepared in Poland and, to my knowledge, even in the world. But while it gives us objectified, detailed insight into the most difficult aspects of studying and working at the Academy of Dramatic Art, in no way does it paint the full picture. As Prof. Julia Kubisa writes in the introduction, “This is not all there is to the Academy – a place towards which many people feel loyalty and much positive emotion in addition to identifying with the school’s values”. We decided to take a look at ourselves from the most uncomfortable point of view, the one that had not been willingly assumed by any theater school, and to talk about it publicly. I am convinced that such transparency will empower our community. We are hiding nothing; instead, we are giving over the narrative about our community into independent researchers’ hands and starting a public debate. Through this, we are able to cut short any speculations as to what may be going on within our school’s four walls, and to reinforce the process of systemic change which – we believe – encompasses not just the Academy of Dramatic Art, but also the entire theater environment in Poland.

We are ready to face the challenges arising from this newly acquired knowledge.

# **A survey of the community at the Academy of Dramatic Art**

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discrimination in the community of the  
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# A survey of the community at the Academy of Dramatic Art

At the turn of 2021 and 2022, after a series of concerning reports and public call-outs, a group of researchers from the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Warsaw was asked by the leadership of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw to conduct a survey on abuse and discrimination at the ADA. The survey was divided into two parts: in-depth interviews with students and teachers and questionnaires. 43 students (26 women and 17 men) and 22 teachers (11 women and 11 men) were interviewed; questionnaires were collected from 106 students (67 women, 34 men, 2 other, 3 declined to answer) and 81 teachers (36 women, 43 men, 2 declined to answer). The researchers' objective was to identify the forms of abuse, mistreatment, boundary violations, discrimination and sexual harassment as reported by the students and employees of the Academy. Moreover, the study characterized the school's organizational culture, with special attention paid to the mechanisms of perpetuating behavioral norms conducive to accepting discrimination and abuse. Therefore, apart from questions directly relevant to possible mistreatment, much space was devoted to didactic work and the student experience, including such matters as student assessment and motivation, relationships with other students and teachers, authority-building by lecturers and communication in classes. The research was conducted at an exceptional moment in the

Academy – the time of tumultuous change (turbulence, as scholars call it), initiated by students who had reported irregularities in the school's functioning. The leadership of the National Academy of Dramatic Art reacted swiftly by intervening, in some cases, as well as expanding its anti-abuse policy that had been implemented in 2019. Apart from establishing the position of a Student Ombudsperson (Rzecznik/Rzeczniczka Praw Studenckich) in 2019 and adopting the Code of Ethics in the same year, a comprehensive Anti-Mobbing and Anti-Discrimination Procedure was approved, a Committee for Monitoring Inappropriate Actions and Discrimination Prevention was formed and the first Employee Ombudsperson (Rzecznik/Rzeczniczka Praw Pracowniczych) was appointed, all in 2021. Moreover, the so-called selection year was abolished, anti-abuse workshops were organized for employees and a forum was held between students (who called it a watershed moment), the leadership and the staff, where “the students could talk, the professors could talk, everyone could express their opinion and some sort of a plan for the school; [they could say] how they perceived what was happening” (this and the following quotations are taken from the interviews with students and teachers conducted as part of the study). According to many who spoke about it, the forum had returned a sense of agency to the students. Finally, this sociological survey was requested. At that moment, the students had gained new representation by the Ombudsperson, while the teachers had not, and the anti-abuse workshops had been offered to the Academy's employees first. This, respondents said, had caused a sense of imbalance in expectations towards the students and the teachers. At the same time, a greater initial focus on student safety was understandable, considering the circumstances and context of the changes. The wave of callouts in the Polish theater school environment (see above) had demonstrated that the teaching methods themselves may foster the potential for violations, exploitation and harm, especially because schools did not provide the possibility to report such cases within their structures, nor any proper response and prevention procedures.

The survey started with in-depth interviews. For some students, conversations with sociologists took on a personal and restorative dimension. Meanwhile, some teachers welcomed the survey, wanting to share their concerns or, in some cases, even fears about the changes. The primary fear involved false accusations: “because of this whole anti-discrimination policy, the students have in fact been given a powerful tool to make illegitimate claims or accusations against lecturers. This is an intense fear, and it can be felt” – one teacher commented. The fear of false accusations against teachers was also expressed by the students, mostly men. The

students also spoke about the ambiguous nature of some allegations. Whereas situations involving discrimination or sexual harassment seemed more clear-cut to them, they expressed reservations about the idea of mobbing. In the interviews, the respondents emphasized that not all members of the ADA's community shared the belief in the necessity of changes. The absence of universal acceptance for change usually intensifies conflict, solidifies barriers and fuels fears against reporting inappropriate behavior. In the respondents' narratives, a recurring statement could be heard that older members of the community were the most skeptical because they had become accustomed to a particular didactic model for performing arts schools over the years. In particular, they were referring to the master-apprentice relationship, which had determined the education process at the Academy of Dramatic Art for many years. According to that group of older employees, the hierarchical model was appropriate and needed no revisions. They would argue for maintaining the status quo by saying that the actor's profession inherently required both the necessity to transcend one's own boundaries, and a type of training which was physically and mentally exhausting. Some respondents believed that the changes were happening too slowly, while others were concerned that they were happening too quickly. Many worried that their hesitation would be labelled as "backwardness" and excess conservatism, even if – in their perception – they cared for the good of the academic community and the quality of education. Others were afraid that some mistreatment (especially of structural nature) would not be recognized, rendering the restorative process at the Academy impossible. One should immediately add that the quantitative survey did not confirm the reluctance and concerns articulated in the interviews. The vast majority of both the students and the teachers approved of the changes (up to 86%). They acknowledged that these changes may contribute to the Academy's improvement, even if they are difficult (for more on this, see below). Importantly, the overwhelming majority did not believe that the changes could negatively affect what the respondents considered the crux of the matter: the essence of teaching and studying at the Academy of Dramatic Art.

# **What is experienced as a boundary violation at the Academy of Dramatic Art?**

An overview of a survey on abuse and discrimination in the community of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

# What is experienced as a boundary violation at the Academy of Dramatic Art?

The survey has shown those boundary violations as well as certain forms of abuse, discrimination and sexual harassment of varying intensity have occurred at the Academy of Dramatic Art. However, the survey has not revealed any drastic past transgressions nor indicated particular people who would persistently exhibit inappropriate behavior. Rather, it has found that in the course of their studies, students are subject to many difficult situations, which erode their sense of safety and psychological and physical integrity. The sum of these experiences translates into a sense of personal boundary violation, and entails high costs to the students' well-being and mental and psychological health as well as to what could be called their artistic autonomy and sensibility.

Personal boundaries are usually crossed in class. This is strongly correlated with the effort and the many challenges experienced by both students and teachers. Intense, often extreme effort, which is treated as the natural part of education in the Academy, blurs the lines between learning, sacrifice, harm and coercion. The Academy has developed a particular ethos of effort and sacrifice, including the constant probing of one's own boundaries. The practice is undoubtedly considered a fixture and a legacy of the school. The expectation of extreme effort directed at the students often comes as the teachers' response to unsatisfactory results of the students' work. The problem is that it has become a way to deal with a lack of feasible ideas on how to support the students in their learning process. In this sense, the responsibility for insufficient results is shifted onto the students.

It may happen that such responsibility-shifting substitutes the collective work on how to achieve the desired effect.

Boundary crossing at the Academy is highly ambivalent and should not only be associated with negative outcomes. The interviews have identified the overarching goals of the expectation to cross one's boundaries at the ADA, which are: to transcend the students' personal limitations, discover new dimensions of their personalities and widen the range of their artistic capabilities, thus building their diverse creative potential. However, one key finding of the study pertains to the cost that is always attached to such processes. A transformation in someone's sense of self or self-image is extraordinarily demanding. It requires almost superhuman effort, often at the expense of the person's psychological and physical wellbeing. The research gives no basis to assume that every student at the Academy undergoes such a process of transcending their own emotions, conditioning and self-image, nor that they experience aspects of this process at a scale that would imply abuse – the “price” paid for artistic transformation. Still, the findings do point to inappropriate mechanisms and actions that drive up the cost of this process and contribute to some destructive qualities.

The collected material has led the researchers to a conclusion that the key context or even the source of boundary violations and abuse at the ADA is the ambivalence that stems from the frequent use of irony as a characteristic communication code in the school community. Those who make sarcastic remarks likely view them as part of a convention, a sort of game that should not be taken personally. Still, the mixed signals on which sarcasm relies and the asymmetrical situation where students have limited possibilities to react to such remarks, generate not so much ambivalence as confusion. It is further exacerbated by the fluidity of lines between ironic comments, which are considered allusions to the students' personalities or behavior, and those which are offered as actual critique of their class performance. In point of fact, as the study has shown, recurring sarcastic personal comments do not constitute helpful critique or professional advice, instead shutting the students down emotionally and cognitively. Perhaps the teachers intend to mobilize the student's effort. But when such communication becomes day-to-day reality, it sends the students on an emotional rollercoaster ride. The state of deep uncertainty results from the fact that students can expect virtually any kind of reaction to their performance from the teachers, and any constructive feedback may be accompanied by comments that could hardly be considered advice to hone their skills. Praise on the one hand and ironic criticisms on the other hand increase the amplitude of



emotions generated in class. Students have described their education process to the researchers as a never-ending sinusoidal wave – emotional states constantly alternating between euphoria and a desperately low sense of self-worth.

The widespread acceptance of impulsive or simply hurtful comments made by teachers in class stems from the belief that they are necessary for self-improvement and collaboration between teachers and students. They may also be a method of extracting the right expressions in acting.

Although the students have said that the teachers' particular behaviors are to blame for these violations, the students' tiredness (and often exhaustion) – which was a recurring theme in the interviews – is not without its significance. On the other hand, the teachers have mentioned a sense of being misunderstood by the class participants, the students' helplessness as well as the frequent strong personal involvement in the tasks, which requires great effort and sometimes morphs into frustration.

In the study, “the violation of boundaries” was defined as an experience by a member of the Academy's community (whether a student or a teacher), which causes pronounced discomfort – the impossibility of further collaboration without internal resistance. The term “non-consent” was deliberately not used, because boundary violation often provokes unconscious reactions, rather than immediate recognition and understanding. The following general ways to violate boundaries were identified:

- undermining someone's value, primarily as a future alum of the Academy – an independent artist;
- statements that are received as a critique of the person rather than the performance: their personality, appearance, way of being, beliefs and attitudes, often associated with forms of public stigmatization;
- violations of corporal integrity (e.g., pushing, touching, approaching without warning or consent);
- the use of persuasion or coercion to obtain behaviors, or creating the conditions to obtain a difficult emotional state desired in an acting exercise, which ends up being the student's real, personal experience, rather than an effect of their deliberate effort; e.g. inducing a real feeling of fear, sadness, humiliation or debasement which cause them to cry;
- articulation and maintenance of expectations that produce a defensive reaction in the person at whom they are directed, such as doubt, reluctance or protest.

The most common behaviors that lead to boundary violation were identified by researchers based on qualitative interviews with the students. Next, the questionnaires checked incidence of each type of behavior, as shown in the chart below.



Chart 1. Discrimination and abusive behavior experienced in class by students from their teachers

For the most part, these behaviors comprise verbal articulations, largely as a way to show impatience and frustration, but also to ridicule or criticize personality traits or appearance (rather than the course of an exercise itself and the broader learning process), and sexual jokes and innuendos. Then, there are physical reactions of disapproval or impatience (impulsive gestures or motions unrelated to the exercise, throwing objects). Finally, the violation of corporal intimacy and integrity may occur, including touching, pulling, pushing the person without warning or their consent and shortening the physical distance between the teachers and students (e.g., standing too close to someone without an apparent reason).

The most common and upsetting for the people who experience them are verbal boundary violations. Counterintuitively, it is more difficult to react immediately (e.g. by expressing disapproval of the behavior), as they take place because they happen in class where a hierarchy is at play: the lecturer is the students' superior. Communication based on overt and covert attacks on the students' appearance, personality traits, general predispositions and skills is commonplace. It lowers self-esteem, fuels insecurities and gradually takes away the students' own artistic sensibilities. Impulsive reactions, gestures and yelling are generally a way for the teachers to articulate their impatience and frustration, but also to mark their position of power. Cases of corporal boundary violations occur less frequently, and they are usually ambiguous situations when the students cannot tell what part of the exercise is and what "actually" encroaches on their intimate sphere. These situations arise when no earlier mutual agreements on exercises involving physical contact have been made. Abusive and aggressive behavior, though similar in appearance to boundary crossing, involves coercion and a sense of injustice as well as pressure felt by people subjected to it.

The quantitative survey has demonstrated how these experiences vary between genders. The difference proved substantial and stemmed from the broader problem of gender-based discrimination diagnosed at the Academy of Dramatic Art. Female students hear sexual jokes and innuendos in class three times as often as male students, and experience the teachers' standing too close to them without a professional reason five times as often. Moreover, female students encounter the expectation to disconnect from their own emotions decidedly more often than male students, which causes discomfort, as is the case with humiliation based on their appearance or lack of skill and ridicule. They have also more frequently experienced being touched without warning and being looked up and down or stared at. Some of these women's experiences involve the type of sexual harassment that

could be called “a hostile environment”. Although the students are not emotionally blackmailed or molested, their private space is encroached upon and they may feel objectified by these half-joking, half-abusive interactions with other members of the Academy’s community. This chart shows how the experience of the same behaviors by teachers during class varies by gender.

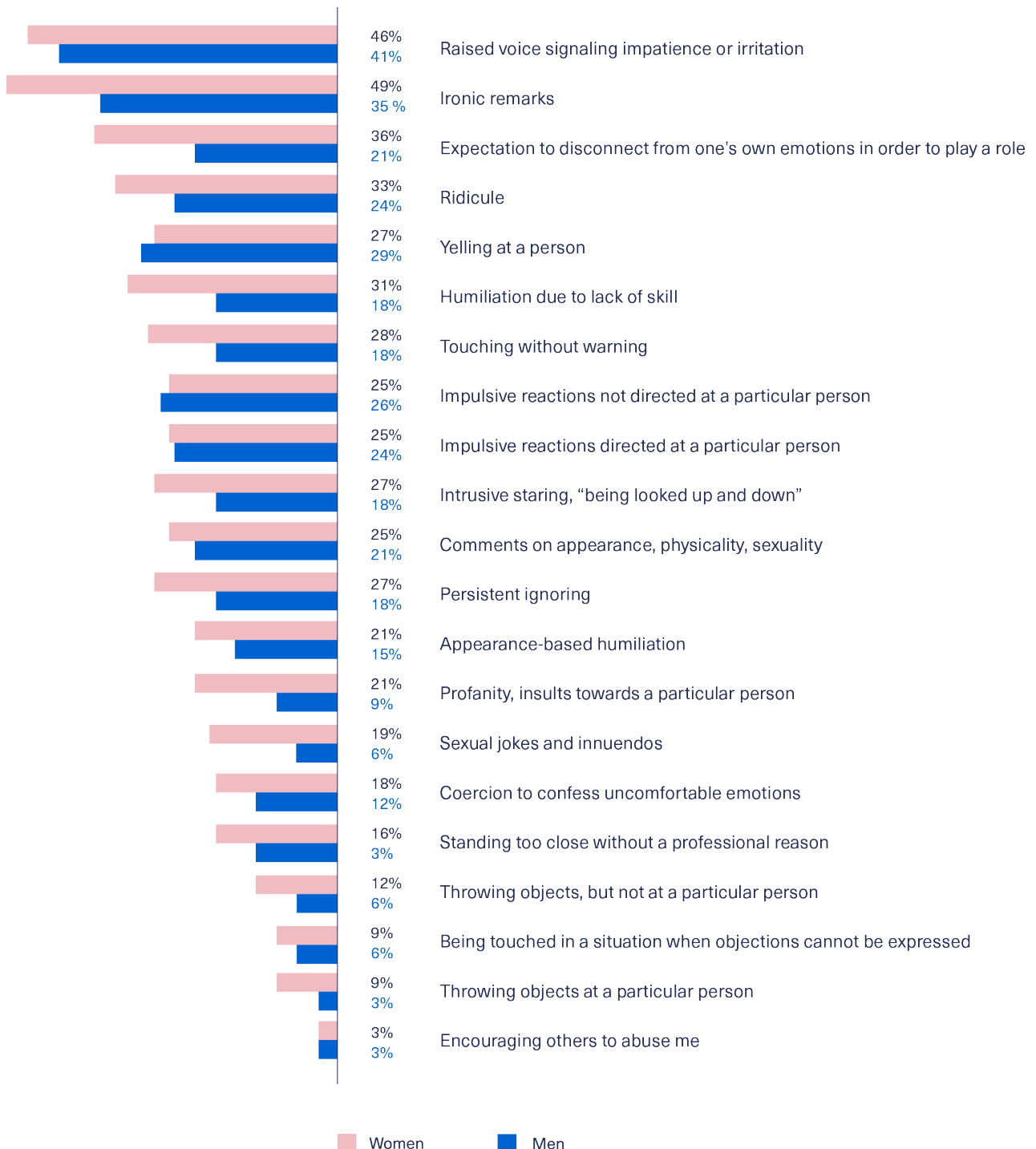


Chart 2. Discrimination and abusive behavior experienced in class by female and male students from their teachers

The final comparison demonstrates how experiences of abuse differed depending on the students' seniority when the survey was conducted. The research has shown a very considerable difference between third-, fourth- and fifth-year students, and first- and second-year students. At the time of the survey, the senior students reported experiencing abuse or discrimination decidedly more frequently than their younger counterparts (an exception here is being touched without warning, which was reported by junior students marginally more often).



Chart 3. Discrimination and abusive behavior experienced in class by junior and senior students from their teachers

The clear difference in experiences may be interpreted as a sign that the changes that have been introduced to the Academy since 2019 are working, and the implemented solutions are bringing results. However, at this point, it is difficult to tell how lasting the change is and how profoundly it translates into the Academy's organizational culture. Regardless of the significant differences, which may suggest that the ADA is becoming a safer and friendlier space for the students, it should be stressed that both student age groups have shared experiences of being touched without warning, being addressed in a raised voice, ridicule and ironic remarks. This means that these are the first and very commonplace experiences encountered by students at the Academy. One important diagnosis contained in the report is the observation that the communication culture at the ADA is characterized by brutalization of language, which often relies on irony and permits many forms of verbal and gestural aggression. The key aspect is the severe asymmetry and hierarchy in relationships: teachers can allow themselves much more in communication, and they have the possibility to adjust their distance to the students at will, either by fraternizing or formalizing the relationship.

# **From a normal situation to abuse**

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# From a normal situation to abuse

Part of the questionnaire was designed to identify which of the experiences presented in the charts above are classified as mistreatment both by students and by teachers, and which are considered within the norm. The aim was to establish how normalized abusive behavior was. Among the experiences most frequently reported by the respondents, many were then categorized as abusive and boundary-violating. Both the students and the teachers have deemed yelling, humiliation, sexual innuendos and sarcasm as strongly inappropriate. Nevertheless, these behaviors are commonplace in the Academy, and – crucially – exhibited by teachers in class.

In this context, the status of the frequent ironic comments is interesting. For some respondents, they fit within the limits of acceptability despite causing discomfort. However, other respondents considered them a violation. For example, irony is a very ambiguous communication device, which may both support the education process to some extent, and undermine it completely. Similarly, because yelling is both accepted and condemned, the consequences of using it are complex. Notably, in both cases, those who deemed a behavior acceptable emphasized the accompanying discomfort which – as has been said above – performs a variety of functions in the education process.

In sum, it is worth to observe how the opinions on norm and abuse are distributed for specific categories of behaviors. The chart below indexes some situations that may occur in class, comparing the students' opinions (S) to the teachers' ones (T).



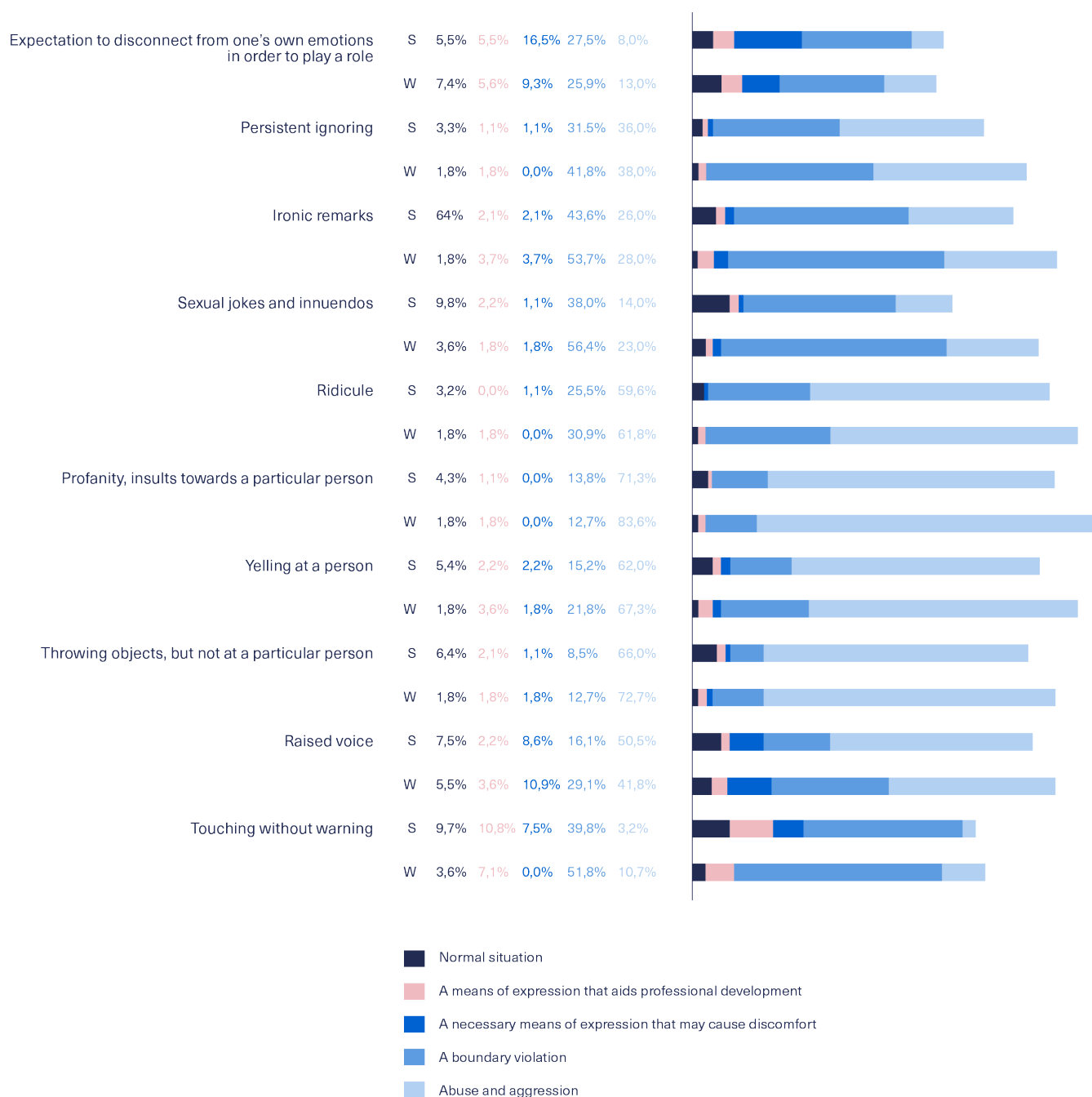


Chart 4. From a normal situation to abuse – the categorization of behavior in class by students and teachers.

This comparison reveals differences in replies between teachers and students, which illuminate the broader context of the research. The students are more likely to regard sexual jokes and innuendos as normal; the teachers are stricter about the issue, considering such comments as violations and abuse. The teachers also more rigorous about insults and profanity directed at a particular person as well as raised voices. On the other hand, the students are more likely to deem yelling as abuse and a boundary violation. Although touching someone without warning is considered as a boundary violation by most students, it is striking that more students than

teachers consider it normal. The two groups have the same view of persistent ignoring, ridicule and throwing objects.

An interesting finding is that the teachers declare a considerably stricter norm system than the students, thus being more likely to categorize particular behavior as a boundary violation or abuse. At the same time, they are the ones who exhibit such behaviors towards the students in their own classes as unequivocally indicated by the survey. One explanation could be the inaccurate assessment of their own behavior by teachers who may perceive their own actions differently than the students do. In any case, the study has shown that there exists a significant discrepancy between the declared and lived norms among the teachers at the Academy of Dramatic Art.

# **Inappropriate behavior at the Academy of Dramatic Art**

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# Inappropriate behavior at the Academy of Dramatic Art

## Mobbing

Mobbing is defined as the persistent, systematic and long-lasting bullying, intimidation and humiliation of a person, which causes a lowered self-assessment of professional aptitude, isolates the victim or excludes them from a group. Understood this way, the phenomenon rarely occurs at the Academy of Dramatic Art. However, as a result of verbal abuse and boundary violations by a number of teachers, students report the same effect as would be achieved by the persistent behavior of one mobber. Many students talk about experiencing deep negative emotions stemming from mistreatment in classes. What the students describe are the psychological, emotional and somatic effects of mobbing. The behaviors described by the respondents, such as yelling, cursing and name-calling, humiliation based on appearance, eruptions of negative emotions (annoyance, frustration) and transferring them onto students as well as sarcastic remarks and ridicule – all of these meet the criteria of mobbing. One may ask whether the phenomenon was long-lasting: exhibited by particular teachers for extended periods of time. However, this study – rather than being an investigation – was intended as a diagnostic examination, and the researchers did not target the practices of particular teachers. Looking at abusive behaviors or boundary violations, the researchers have mapped a constellation of many people's practices instead of pinpointing particular, long-term wrongdoings. This means that individual lecturers may exhibit abusive or boundary-crossing behaviors in an incidental and irregular manner rather than systemically. Still,

from the students' point of view, the sum of these behaviors constitutes one painful experience, which often brings adverse psycho-somatic effects. This means that although one could hardly accuse particular teachers of mobbing according to the accepted definition, a sort of tacit acceptance of these mobbing-like behaviors is embedded in the Academy's organizational culture.

## **Sexual harassment**

Apart from the forms discussed above, there are two types of situations where sexual harassment may occur in the Academy. One, students are sometimes not afforded the opportunities to prepare for tasks involving intimate scenes (with kissing, touching or depictions of sexual relations and sexual violence), control their course and express their non-consent. Two, some lecturers mix the teaching/learning sphere with the personal sphere by befriending students and using these friendships to attend student parties and/or proposition students. (There has been a past instance when a lecturer committed acts of sexual molestation. The school leadership intervened and ended his employment at the Academy of Dramatic Art.)

## **Discrimination**

The survey has indicated that there are two principal forms of discrimination in the ADA's community. The first one, the most commonplace and visible, is gender-based discrimination, primarily of women. It manifests itself on several planes: at the level of day-to-day social contact – in how women are treated and addressed, which has been discussed above; and systemically: in women's limited access to interesting roles which would stimulate personal growth, and in the lack of gender-inclusive repertoire and readings. The experience of discrimination is felt by female students, but not by female lecturers, who illustrate the transformation taking place in the Academy by mentioning language changes, specifically the deliberate, inclusive use of feminine endings in Polish gendered words. In the lecturers' opinion, the use of feminine grammatical forms gives space to feminine points of view and highlights the diversity of perspectives, which are not necessarily limited by the gender binary.

The study discovered another form of discrimination, which is specific to the Academy of Dramatic Art and based on the students' course of study. Almost half of the respondents who pursued majors other than Acting have reported experiences of being discriminated against.

## The sources of inappropriate behavior

Based on the questionnaires and interviews, the researchers have divided the sources of inappropriate behavior at the Academy of Dramatic Art into the following categories: ones resulting from personal shortcomings, in particular soft skills, and ones rooted in the organizational culture at the Academy.

Personal shortcomings in soft (communication and interpersonal) skills include:

- 1.** The lecturers' insufficient capability to formulate individualized, constructive feedback. This is exacerbated by the opinion that the students are mature enough to report if they do not understand something, and to undertake the effort of improving their technique on their own once they have received critical feedback. In point of fact, sufficient feedback is critical to the possibility of progress. When it is unclear or missing, the students experience stress, emotional shutdown and defensive reactions which, in turn, induce a sense of helplessness in the teachers, expressed in outbursts of frustration or impulsive and violent actions. The observation was confirmed by the results of the survey, where the students could indicate that there was insufficient information on assessment criteria, the principles of collaboration and possible adaptation of the outcomes to their individual needs. The expectations articulated by the students include the transparency of the assessment criteria and feedback as well as the consideration of the emotional state and exhaustion of the students that stem from the intensity of their work.
- 2.** The lecturers' inability to communicate the point and purpose of exercises in class. This leads to such phenomena as blame-shifting after failures or poor educational outcomes. As a consequence, the students are afraid to ask for explanation and articulate their need to have an impact over the artistic tasks they are expected to perform.
- 3.** The lecturers' inability to contain their frustration. This could be interpreted two ways: either the lecturers are unaware that the tension they create to motivate the

students has serious side effects, or this is a symptom of helplessness or the lack of understanding which they have difficulty expressing in any other way. The study has found that the lecturers have not had the opportunity to talk to others about their doubts, difficulties in the didactic process and states of tension. The Academy's lecturers enjoy a high degree of autonomy with regard to their teaching methods, and the knowledge transmission between them is rather limited, mostly based on friendships and social rapport. There is want of mechanisms for sharing knowledge, experiences and expectations, and for discussion on coping with difficulties in the didactic process. In some cases, this may generate frustration, a sense of uncertainty and other difficult emotions. However, these difficulties and frustrations do not seem to stem from the school's hierarchy: most lecturers do not feel neglected or rejected by their supervisors. On the contrary, the respondents have said that they receive support from the deans and the rector. Especially positive opinions have been expressed about the rector, who is regarded as an empathetic and fair person. Despite this generally positive climate, divisions exist between employees. Some lecturers only work at the Academy, while others also continue to pursue their craft elsewhere. The latter are commonly believed to be better teachers. One respondent said that this was because they were able to maintain greater detachment from the school environment. The teachers have also articulated doubts about the assistantship system. According to these respondents, the engagement of an assistant relies solely on a professor's arbitrary decision. Meanwhile, although candidates appointed to the position of adjunct professor or higher as a result of the recruitment process do sign an employment agreement, it is often a fixed-term contract. The management do not communicate the possibilities of obtaining a permanent agreement.

**4.** The students' inability to express discomfort, hurt or fear. This is mostly due to the ambivalence of their relationships with the lecturers, who at times seem like protectors and guides in a challenging world, and at other times as demanding partners who expect assertive attitudes and other behaviors proper to a partnership. In addition, the conviction instilled in the students that "the world outside the Academy is ruthless" leads an attitude where perseverance, conformity and meeting the teachers' expectations become virtues.

# The problems of the organizational culture at the Academy

The organizational culture at the Academy of Dramatic Art is characterized by paternalism. Its many manifestations include the fact that the teachers lengthen and shorten the distance between them and the students at will, creating a sort of an emotional rollercoaster. In addition, student–teacher relationships are shaped exclusively by the teachers. Although the community members declare that these are “partner” relationships, they are marked by the patronizing treatment of the students, with manifestations such as frequent remarks on the students’ appearance, personality traits or particular behaviors.

The teachers may also want to “immunize” the students to stress, criticism and tension, which are purported to be commonplace in their future professional lives. In addition, lecturers fraternize with students, showing them that, in fact, only one party in the relationship controls the tone of discourse, including tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic or humorous interactions. This phenomenon is crucial as it presupposes the existence of parallel worlds, double standards and double principles in relationships within the community: those overt and articulated, and those covert, arbitrary and often unclear for students. In other words, the teachers permit themselves to ridicule the students, whereas the students learn these behavior patterns and use them in student–student relationships, but they are not allowed to reciprocate the teachers’ derision. The lecturers often justify their use of such teaching methods by referring to the realities of the market: the rules governing the work and performance assessment of professional actors, directors or puppeteers. Consequently, the students believe that they have a protective umbrella put over them during their academy years to allow them to gradually adapt to the merciless market rules. The researchers have called such an attitude in thought, speech and behavior “market paternalism”.

Importantly, relationships involving personal boundary violation are reproduced in preparing future directors to dominate over actors. For example, the relationship of domination is established at examinations and performance assessments. Performance assessments by a panel of reviewers take place in the presence of the student actors. The teachers assess both the student directors’ and the student actors’ work. Among critical remarks to the director, the panel may talk about poor control



over actors. The actors present in that situation are passive and objectified: the discussion is held as if over their heads.

In the community of the Academy of Dramatic Art, tensions can be felt between students of different majors as well as between teachers of the so-called craft classes and art classes. These tensions arise in particular spaces and situations, such as examination boards, recruitment interviews, combined classes for students of different majors or student government elections. This limits collaboration possibilities and fosters competition for community status, resulting in behaviors which are received as boundary violations (such as undermining someone's competence or objectification), discrimination and sexual harassment.

Most majors pursued at the ADA are collective in nature: the outcomes of both the students' individual and collective work depend on their collaboration, mutual understanding and trust. Apart from fueling the intensity of the study experience, it fosters deep relationships. On the other hand, as lecturers favor some students, rivalries appear. Over 45% of the student respondents have said that relationships with lecturers they build in classes will have a "strong" (or "very strong") impact on their future professional career path. The more heated the rivalry between students is, the less likely any collaboration between them and an understanding with their teachers become. The ethos of effort and sacrifice causes tension in relationships, generates frustration and lowers the students' self-esteem when confronted with critique. Such a situation is the breeding ground for abuse, because exhaustion and fatigue limit the capabilities for collaboration and the collective creation of meaning; instead, frustration appears, experienced as personal weakness or as the other students' fault.

Whereas the respondents perceived the acceptance of strong language (cursing and name-calling) as aggression and boundary violation, the researchers' attention was drawn to the prevalence of profanity, including its use in classes. While swearing may fulfil many functions, including the release of pent-up emotions, it also brutalizes social relationships. In the student-teacher rapport, profanity introduces negative emotions and fear as well as emphasizes the teacher's dominance.

The architecture of the Academy itself merits attention, particularly the organization of spaces in the Miodowa Street building. It reflects the divisions in the community, especially between majors, but also between the students and teachers. Although the split is informal, the students are perfectly aware of it and any breach of "territory" borders is sanctioned (by hostile stares and comments). Student actors have

their umieralnie (“dying rooms”), where they can catch a breath after exhausting classes; student directors occupy the third floor, while students of Theater Studies lack their own space, so they can most often be encountered in the corridor of the first-floor where their classes usually take place. The interviews have shown that the absence of relaxation spaces for both teachers and students (apart from the “dying rooms”) makes it difficult to rest in the Academy’s building.

The respondents have also indicated an evaluation problem: the insufficient possibilities for the Academy to assess actions rather than people. Assessment is associated with criticism, which is often both expressed and taken personally. Although the Academy has a system of anonymous teacher assessment surveys by students at the end of each semester, it does not fulfil its purpose. The questionnaires are only filled out by a small percentage of students. There is a general belief that critical remarks have no impact on the leadership’s actions towards the lecturers. Moreover, due to the Academy’s small size, students worry that teachers may correctly guess the author of critical feedback despite the questionnaires being anonymous, and retaliate. Therefore, the student surveys cannot be treated as a helpful source of information for the teachers to hone their craft. This adds to the distance between the teachers and the students.

# **Change – towards psycho-social safety in the Academy's community**

An overview of a survey on abuse and  
discrimination in the community of the  
Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy  
of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

# Change – towards psycho-social safety in the Academy's community

The research team has examined the changes in the Academy of Dramatic Art that are geared towards eliminating abuse, harassment and discrimination on several levels, looking at such metrics as: the people's awareness of the school's structures, including the Student Ombudsperson, the Code of Ethics and the reporting and response procedures for cases of violations and/or abuse, as well as the workings of these procedures. Because the procedures had been in place for a short time, the survey only took into account whether any abuse was being reported at all (and if so, to whom and how often), rather than judging the efficacy of or community satisfaction with any interventions by relevant institutions. Opinions and attitudes towards the procedures and broader changes in the Academy were also investigated. The researchers studied the adverse effects of change, such as resistance, concerns about its excess pace and fears that the solutions being introduced are transforming the Academy more profoundly, beyond abuse prevention. These problems interested the research team especially in the lecturers' statements.

The question on where and how to formally report violations or abuse did not pose a challenge to the respondents. The vast majority declared they knew where to communicate possible problems and were aware of the current procedures and support systems. Many people indicated a complaint to the deans or the rector as the solution. The rector was perceived as the "final" or "highest" instance who "gives

us additional support in this moment, in this situation". The open-mindedness of these school officials gave students a feeling that their voice would be heard and the reported matter treated seriously. Almost three-fourths of the Academy's community were aware that the Student Ombudsperson (SO) operated at the school and that established abuse-reporting procedures existed. The remaining one-fourth included people whom the news had not reached, and others who found it unimportant or rejected it altogether. The students' attitude towards the SO was complicated. Over 60% of students would report a case of abuse to the SO – which demonstrates not only their awareness of the role, but also a degree of trust. However, the remaining one-third expressed reservations about the SO's functioning.

Among the teachers, approximately 75% were aware of the existing procedures and around 40% believed them to be effective. In a hypothetical case of abuse, the teachers would like to refer to the Employee Ombudsperson, which suggested the need to establish this new role. The qualitative study showed that the critical attitudes to the new procedures were based on three principal reasons: (1) the belief that they were too complicated and took too long, and therefore excessively delayed action; (2) the worry that they did not guarantee safety to the reporting person (here, the key component seems to be the fear of possible repercussions for the student's future career); (3) the idea that they weakened the students' trust in their lecturers, changing the nature of the student–teacher relationship. Here, it bears repeating how often the respondents justified their reluctance towards the changes and new institutional solutions by referring to the ethos of effort and the inevitability of crossing one's boundaries in the acting profession as well as the didactic process in the Academy.

The students' responses revealed that they considered the lecturers' participation in and support for the changes and new procedures as a prerequisite to guaranteeing the Academy's healthy functioning. Without it, fears about the further course of their studies and careers among the people who would like to report a case would "compete with" the need for change, and, crucially, with reporting abuse. Among those who had not reported any abuse, the significant proportion of 21% of women and 18% of men expressed this concern. There are clearly serious obstacles to the undertaking.

At the same time, the survey has unequivocally demonstrated that transformation understood more broadly, not just as procedures but as a general direction for change, has met with widespread acceptance in the school community. The researchers asked a number of questions on the possible impact the changes could have on the social reality of the ADA. 86% of women and 86% of men agreed with

the statement that the changes offered an opportunity to improve the situation at the school. Only 9% of men and 3% of women expressed the opposite view. Few people declared they had no opinion on the matter.

Attitudes to the statement that the changes did not take the lecturers' point of view into account were much more polarized. 33% of women and 42% of men agreed with it, 47% of women and 42% of men disagreed, and 16% of each group declared they had no opinion.

80% of women and 88% of men agreed that "the change is difficult but necessary". There were no men and just 8% of women who disagreed with this statement.

Moreover, 78% of women and 67,44% of men disagreed that the changes "encroach on the essence of the studies".

Below is the detailed distribution of answers for this section of the questionnaire provided by the lecturers – whose group expressed greater concern over the changes than the students in the qualitative interviews. However, in the quantitative study, the majority declared that the pace of changes for the safety of students in relationships with teachers at the ADA was appropriate.

	The changes are being introduced too quickly	The changes are being introduced at an appropriate pace	The changes are being introduced too slowly	Don't Know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer
Total	11,39%	55,70%	3,80%	27,85%	1,27%
Women	5,56%	61,11%	5,56%	27,78%	0,00%
Men	17,07%	53,66%	2,44%	26,83%	0,00%

Table 1. The assessment of the pace of changes for the safety of students in relationships with teachers at the Academy of Dramatic Art – the opinions of lecturers, separated into women and men.

Female and male teachers differed in their assessment of the scope of the changes being introduced. Most women (69%) believed that the extent of the changes was appropriate; 39% of men concurred. One-fourth of the men thought that the changes were too far-reaching; among women, only 11% agreed. Importantly, only 3% of women and 10% of men considered the changes too superficial. One could conclude that the women surveyed had a more pronounced view on the matter and generally accepted the extent of the changes, while the men were more divided, with one fourth declaring they had no opinion.

	The changes are too far-reaching	The changes have the appropriate scope	The changes are too superficial	Don't Know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer
Total	17,72%	51,90%	6,33%	22,78%	1,27%
Women	11,11%	69,44%	2,78%	16,67%	0,00%
Men	24,39%	39,02%	9,76%	26,83%	0,00%

Table 2. The assessment of the scope of changes for the safety of students in relationships with teachers at the Academy of Dramatic Art – the opinions of lecturers, separated into women and men.

Finally, the researchers asked the teachers to react to a number of statements concerning the possible impact of the changes on the social reality of the Academy of Dramatic Art.

The changes offer an opportunity to improve the situation at the Academy	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Don't know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer	Total
Women	00,00%	55,56%	30,56%	2,78%	8,33%	2,78%	100,00%

The changes do not take the lecturers' point of view into account	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Don't know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer	Total
Women	27,78%	8,33%	25,00%	19,44%	16,67%	2,78%	100,00%
Men	18,60%	18,60%	23,26%	23,26%	16,28%	0,00%	100,00%

The changes are difficult but necessary	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Don't know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer	Total
Women	2,78%	44,44%	36,11%	5,56%	8,83%	2,78%	100,00%
Men	0,00%	39,53%	48,84%	0,00%	11,63%	0,00%	100,00%

The changes encroach on the essence of the studies at the ADA	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Don't know / It's difficult to tell	Decline to answer	Total
Women	44,44%	0,00%	8,33%	33,33%	11,11%	2,78%	100,00%
Men	48,84%	2,33%	16,28%	18,60%	13,95%	0,00%	100,00%

Table 3. The assessment of the possible impact of the changes on the social reality at the Academy of Dramatic Art – the opinions of lecturers, separated into women and men.

To summarize this section of questions, one could point out that the lecturers generally approve of the change, agreeing that it may contribute to an improvement of the situation at the ADA even if it is difficult. Importantly, the vast majority do not believe that the changes would encroach on what is the crux for most respondents: the specific character of teaching and studying at the Academy. Moreover, one finding that requires attention is the noticeable belief that the lecturers' point of view on the changes is not being taken into consideration.

Therefore, the concern heard in individual interviews that something valuable may be lost in the didactic process and student–teacher relationships as a result of the changes has not found confirmation in the results of the quantitative survey. This leads to a conclusion that this view is not representative of the Academy's majority. According to the research team, expressing skepticism about the changes or describing them as “artificial” may partly be the product of a typical social mechanism which does not only occur in the Academy's community. A small fraction of the students who were socialized for particular types of relationships and value systems in force at the Academy and, in addition, have not necessarily experienced abuse themselves (or have treated it as an indispensable part of their education) may see the change as too swift. The lecturers have widely agreed with the statement that the change is difficult but necessary, which confirms their acknowledgment of its importance. However, it is worth to juxtapose this with the belief shared by one-third of the lecturers that their viewpoint has not been sufficiently appreciated in the transformation. With these concerns in mind, one may assume that the changes should include a discussion on the teaching methods and community relationships not just in the context of abuse and boundary violation, but also of what the group considers important, valuable and effective in education.



# 6 Recommendations

An overview of a survey on abuse and discrimination in the community of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw

# Recommendations

The recommendations that the sociologists have proposed fall into several groups: (a) formal rules; (b) working and studying conditions; (c) support for the didactic process; (d) reflection on the Academy's space; (e) the study program and teaching methods; (f) availability of help.

The researchers have also pointed to some good practices at the Academy of Dramatic Art which foster safe working and studying conditions:

- Group agreements, namely the collective writing of rules and negotiating the conditions of collaboration in the didactic and artistic process, which allow greater work comfort in difficult moments (when the class faces limitations, emotional barriers or the lack of skill). An agreement engages both the students and the teachers to search together for solutions to problems they may encounter in the course of education. Instead of expecting more effort and intensified work solely on the students' part, the teachers should seek the root of the problem in the didactic process rather than in the students' individual predispositions and personalities.
- A didactic model based on the master-apprentice relationship. Alongside many critical remarks warning that this model provides room for abuse, favorable opinions were also heard. The respondents stressed that such relationships facilitate the students' artistic growth provided that they are based on mutual respect. Some students described it as a valuable and formative experience that they needed in their education process.
- Feedback. Feedback allows students to create an internal compass – a sense of direction and (self-)reflection on what is successful and what requires more work. This extends beyond one class into the whole program or an academic year. Although the students have said that there should be more information on the rules and criteria of assessment, the quantitative segment of

the research has found that this is not the main problem. Rather, there is a lack of individualized and deep assessment.

- Descriptive, criteria-based evaluation which is derived from feedback. It measures individual development, but also provides a basis for comparison between students. Additionally, this type of assessment promotes competition with clear rules, where personal relationships with teachers are less important than the evaluation based on transparent criteria. The study has shown that, for the students, this would be one of the most significant changes in the didactic process.
- A varied repertoire which encompasses many perspectives, including texts by women and the possibilities to play non-stereotypical female roles. For some students, this is a key element of change in the program. The students have expressed much interest in it, emphasizing that diversity in readings and repertoire is very stimulating for them. Some lecturers are already trying to select plays that would provide a balanced number of interesting male and female roles.
- Psychological support which would allow both students and teachers to understand and cope with emotional tension and feelings of weakness or confusion.

According to the researchers, currently the greatest challenge for the Academy of Dramatic Art is to introduce a new system of evaluation – so that assessment is reliable and regular as well as focused on both the positive and the negative (or the strong and the weak) points of learning and teaching.

A detailed list of recommendations and extensive analyses of the data quoted here are available in the full Polish-language version of the report, published at: <http://akademia.at.edu.pl/>

# **Comments from Change Now project partners**

The report on “Consent to Boundary Violations: The Experience of Studying and Working at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw” sparked intense discussions within the Change Now project team meetings. This comprehensive and systematic study, the first of its kind conducted at a theater school, delved into the specific causes of undesirable behaviors encountered in a theater academy environment. It offered a valuable context for comparing the processes occurring at all partner schools.

During our analysis, we examined both the methodology proposed by the researchers and the potential utility of conducting similar research at other partner schools. We also explored the unique challenges faced by the Warsaw Academy, as revealed in the report, comparing them to the issues encountered by partner schools in the Change Now project.

The contributions presented here from Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam and Hilaty Jones of The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland are the outcomes of our deliberations.

# “Work-in-progress”: notes on social safety from Amsterdam

*Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca*

## By way of opening

I was asked by the project leaders of *CHANGE NOW!* to write a short comment on ‘the state of things in Amsterdam’ when it comes to social safety, abuse and discrimination, equity, access, inclusion and the other areas of interest of the project. The invitation was to briefly summarise the situation at the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD) in Amsterdam and for this comment to then appear with parallel reflections from the other partner institutions in *CHANGE NOW!*. At the same time, this writing will be shared alongside the publication of a synthetic English-language summary of the recent major report of our Polish partners, “The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations. The Experience of Studying and Working at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw” based on the research conducted in 2021-22.

What follows is not a short comment, nor do I consider it by any means a comprehensive summary of the “state of things” at the Academy of Theatre and Dance – a task which feels far too complex to take on here for a range of reasons including

the time available, but also because of the nature of that “state of things” and my relation to it. Instead, the writing below is in part an incomplete record of my own learning around social safety – as someone who is still relatively new to the institution, having moved to the ATD in the summer of 2020, and as a non-Dutch immigrant to the Netherlands<sup>1</sup> - as well as a compilation of some notes and observations that should very much be read as having the status of “work-in-progress”. It is a first attempt to write from what I know, from what I am in the midst of learning and from an emerging awareness of what I do not know from my experiences as a white, straight, cis, non-disabled woman in a position of leadership in the academy.

In these reflections it feels important to acknowledge that teaching is no longer a daily or regular part of my work. In the ten years leading up to when I moved to take up my current post at the ATD, teaching was at the core of my job – working primarily with Bachelors students on Theatre and Performance programs in the context of UK universities, alongside doing research and taking up various management positions. But since I started as Lector and Head of DAS Graduate School in 2020, teaching is not my primary task and therefore I recognise that my perspective in relation to questions of social safety will likely vary significantly from those who are teaching on a regular basis. Within my role, I am regularly in conversations that allow me to hear from teachers, students, researchers and other colleagues about their experiences of social safety; I take part in policy discussions about “social safety” and “diversity and inclusion” at multiple levels in the organization; and questions around social justice, accessibility and equity are emerging as central concerns and guiding values both in my own research and the wider research program that we are trying to build within the Lectorate (or research department) of the Academy which I lead. I am by no means an expert on social safety. But given that the social safety of our school is a matter of collective responsibility and a shared task for students, teachers and staff alike, I welcome this opportunity to reflect on the experiences I have had and to engage in some further research into their context.

*I am writing from home.*

*In these last few days before the summer break, I found I needed to retreat to working from home; as a way to find some rest and distance from the institution and from the*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, language remains a barrier to my understanding and access to relevant resources at times, as I am still in the process of learning Dutch - but the work of translating feels like an important process to enter into in itself to also support non-Dutch speaking students to locate potential areas of solidarity, for instance on anti-racist work.

*emotional labour of recent months. I experience a structural lack of time to process what is happening at the school: both the joyful things and the painful ones,*

*and so I am grateful for the privilege of being able to take this time to be with some of the feelings and memories that I am holding on to from the last year.*

*And grateful to have a little time, finally, to read: to spend more time thinking-with and alongside the texts written by my colleagues at the ATD which I have been editing for the CHANGE NOW! publication, together with some books by wise guides from elsewhere who offer energizing ways to think into the complexity of the experiences and phenomena that institutions bluntly categorise in terms of “social safety” and “diversity and inclusion”.*

*I notice that I do not want to write in the voice of the institution.*

*I notice that I do not want to write “on behalf of” or as representative of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam.*

*But this is why I am here.*

*This is why I have been invited to take up space here.*

*But for whom am I writing: on behalf of whom and for what readers?*

*How does my voice take up space in ways that could be taken up by others that have more important things to say about safety in our Academy than mine?*

The last year, and in particular from my perspective, the last few months before the summer break have been a tumultuous time at the Academy here in Amsterdam. In April 2023, there was an announcement by the Executive Board of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) that there would be a change in the management structure of the school in which former ATD Director, Anthony Heidweiller – who has also been an active participant in CHANGE NOW! – would take up a position of ‘deputy director’ and a new ‘managing director’ (initially on an interim basis) would be appointed. In May and June 2023, various open letters and articles were published in the press in response to this decision and announcement, including those that raised questions about the role that institutional racism may have played in producing the situation. At the same time, a complex and painful situation regarding the Academy’s Mime department has been unfolding some of which is recounted

in the open letter published on June 1, 2023. Here, the authors suggest that: 'In the meantime, the uncertain situation that the mime training is currently in makes a lot clear about the deep ignorance that still prevails within the ATD' – particularly with regards to racialization (Boston et al 2023).

From my perspective, these events have brought the topics of social safety and discrimination to an even more prominent place in the Academy than they already were when the *CHANGE NOW!* project began. It has particularly highlighted social safety and discrimination as a concern for staff as well as students, leading most recently to what feels like a shared realisation among staff of the need for a fundamental re-evaluation of how we relate to and communicate with each other across our differences as colleagues, but also in relation to our colleagues in other academies which belong to the AHK and the AHK itself including its leadership. I cannot go into a detailed analysis of these events here, but at the same time to neglect to mention them would be to deny the fundamental inseparability of my work 'about' social safety and inclusion for *CHANGE NOW!* and the context in which that work took place: "*the state of things*" (or rather, the ongoing "*work-in-progress*" that is the struggle for equitable access to education, art and work that the ATD is part of). It is a deep and painful irony that my own and others' experiences of a *lack* of safety within the organization over the last three years has also affected our capacity to engage in conversation and policy developments *about* social safety within the school.

Already in 2020, Theatre in Education student Toni Blackwell set up 5VOOR12 in her graduation year: a platform with, for and by students to make institutional racism a subject of discussion at the Academy of Theatre and Dance, and at the wider AHK to which it belongs. The aim of the platform was to collectively ask the question: 'how can we contribute to the fight against (institutional) racism starting from our artistry?' and to conduct projects that would lay a foundation 'for discussing institutional racism from the Black Experience'. Among their projects, the student-led platform created a photography exhibition in the stairwell of the Academy called Faces of the Kingdom which its creators described as "A first try in, not only making the words diversity and inclusion tangible, but also giving these terms a face." They also produced a pilot episode for a talk show format where they discuss the exhibition and invite other students to come to them to 'discuss hardships they have had at their education, concerning: institutional racism and (lack of) diversity and inclusion'. I do not currently know what happened with the 5VOOR12 project after these



important first gestures; however, recent events are a reminder of how necessary a structural and ongoing commitment to work of this kind is for our whole school.

Likewise, the important text by my colleague Bojana Mladenović (2023) in the *CHANGE NOW!* publication also includes hugely important insights, the value and urgency of which for the whole Academy feel even more palpable now. Here, Mladenović reflects on seven years of anti-colonial and anti-racist work as the head of SNDO with the aim ‘to make the school safer and less violent for students of color and a space of transformative (read: less violence inducing) learning for the white population of students, teachers and staff’. Her text is divided into two parts: the first focused on the period in which SNDO sought to address how the ‘colonial modernity matrix’ had historically shaped its curriculum and culture; and the second characterised by the research initiative *SNDO Critical Whiteness*, developed in partnership with Joy Mariama Smith which sought to enable their community of students and teachers ‘to critically and transformatively engage with the notion of whiteness’ (Mladenović 2023). At this moment, it is hard not to dream of a future where this work of SNDO is expanded and translated into the Academy as a whole.

What follows here is structured in three parts: the first two parts are more of an attempt to introduce something of the Dutch context for the consideration of social safety in arts academies and a gesture towards the requested summary of institutional activities related to social safety at both the ATD and the AHK. The third part takes the form of two short reflections on the complexities and contradictions that emerge in the space between policies and practices. By way of closing, I then go into a little more depth to narrate what I have learned and am learning about social safety at the ATD from the practice of my friend and colleague, Rajni Shah.

## **I. Concepts of social safety: more or less; safer and braver; safe for whom?**

In the Dutch context, the concept of social safety is often primarily defined by its opposite, with the focus on safety as negated by “undesirable behavior” – including transgressive behaviour, abuse, intimidation, aggression and violence, bullying and discrimination. The stated aim of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) as an organization is to enable students to study and students to work “with pleasure and

a safe feeling”, stating that: “Our university of the arts must be a safe environment for everyone” (AHK 2023a: 1). According to the nationally produced “Social Safety Framework for Art Education” (2021):

*An educational institution is safe when the social, psychological and physical safety of students and staff is not compromised by the actions of others. This means that there is a safe and positive atmosphere within the educational institution. This also means that bullying, discrimination, intimidation, sexual harassment, aggression, violence and other forms of undesirable behaviour are unacceptable and that the institution will take action against them and prevent them as much as possible.*

In AHK policy documents, the discourse on social safety is also closely linked to the question of teacher ‘professionalism’, where inappropriate behaviour is also specifically linked to “unprofessional contact with students” (AHK 2023a: 1). This connection is perhaps more present in universities of applied sciences like the AHK than it might be in University contexts, given the high numbers of teachers working at the academy who come into contact with students in their capacity as professionals from the working field of theatre and dance without necessarily having had specific training in pedagogy or what constitutes ‘professionalism’ in the context of higher education institutions.

In Codes of Conduct, Policy and Regulations texts produced by the ATD and AHK, the definition of social safety is understandably closely linked to the attempt to clarify procedures for complaints and to differentiate roles and responsibilities with regards to how cases are managed and by whom, within the various departments of the institution. In this context, for example, it becomes important to distinguish between complaints about “undesirable behaviour”, from “complaints about education-related matters” and “labour disputes” in order to clarify who to address. Social safety is defined in practice when a decision is taken about whether a report is made to the “Complaints Committee” or the “Examination committee”, for example. Related to this, albeit different, there have also been efforts within the ATD to maintain a distinction between activities related to “Diversity and Inclusion” and those related to “Social Safety” in part to clarify the difference between the functions of different platforms and committees.

In practice though, social safety seems fundamentally inseparable from equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) - not least since it includes discrimination. And indeed, it is precisely what makes social safety cases so complex are the ways in which interpersonal and educational matters become entangled and interconnected with

each other in lived experience. This is not to discount the need for these distinct regulations and decision-making bodies – but only to acknowledge that much of the labour and difficulty involved in this area is precisely concerned with whether to name an experience as a matter of “social safety” or not (and/or as something else too), and if so, of what kind. (For example, the current guidance at the ATD also calls upon receivers of social safety reports to work with the reporter to assess whether a situation is “severe” or “less serious”). This sense of struggle with what social safety actually means and for whom is also linked to the recurrently voiced observation that all kinds of encounters, events and processes in the Academy are now described as feeling “unsafe” in a broader, generalized or more varied way than might be desirable for policy or procedural purposes. (A concern that goes along the lines of the argument: ‘If everything is unsafe then nothing is’).

In recent years, critical discourse around the notion of “safe space” has informed some of the conversations taking place within the ATD, including in relation to the *CHANGE NOW!* project. In this context, students and staff critique the possibility of any universally and completely safe space, and reject any simple binary between safe and unsafe in favour of thinking in terms of *safer* space and engaging with concepts of “brave space”. As student and *CHANGE NOW!* participant Alex Blum suggests in a recent interview, “I think it’s more a question of more or less safe, I wouldn’t be able to answer it like “either/or”, “safe” or “unsafe” (Blum in AHK 2023b). When asked about what social safety actually means to them in practice, Alex goes on to refer to when teachers respect their pronouns, to feeling “seen” by their teachers, to having their questions listened to and to having their failures embraced as part of learning.

Acknowledgment of difference and structural inequalities as the context for specific efforts to create safer learning environments is fundamental. In many cases, students bring with them high degrees of knowledge and understanding – both discursive and practical – about the complexities of the relationships between safety and discomfort for different groups in the context of the systemic structures such as white supremacy, ableism, and cisnormativity<sup>2</sup>. Again, to quote Alex Blum: “Sometimes the privilege of feeling safe or the privilege of feeling comfort comes at the

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2 In the context of post-experience Masters programs like the ones we have at DAS Graduate School, it is highly likely that a teacher can find themselves in a room with students who are themselves already experienced professionals in the field of facilitating safer and more inclusive spaces – in a way that demands co-learning approaches that encourage students to bring their own expertise into the room.

expense of other bodies” (Blum in AHK 2023). As my fellow Lector Aminata Cairo points out, addressing questions of social safety is often not cosy, comfortable or “gezellig” (a word that is identified by some as a quintessential feature of Dutch culture<sup>3</sup>). On the contrary, it involves the acknowledgment that what may make a situation feel safe for some is precisely what makes it feel unsafe for others. This more nuanced perspective is important for our institutions policy makers and writers to take into account – for instance, when the AHK Student Affairs refers to students’ entitlement to “study in a pleasant atmosphere”. Whilst clearly mutual respect can be insisted upon, the challenges of collective learning across difference can by no means be expected to be perpetually “comfortable” or “gezellig”. As Joy Mariama Smith puts it in their text for the *CHANGE NOW!* publication:

*Some people don't like the word 'racism' – those people are usually white people.  
Or maybe people who are not or do not self identify as people of color or not white...*

*Why? – Because it often evokes shame, embarrassment, guilt and more.  
Shame and guilt, coincidentally often prohibit accountability.*

*shame/guilt/embarrassment are not comfortable feelings. Nor should they be, and the belief or supposition that ~~everyone needs to be comfortable~~ white people need to be comfortable is harmful. Oppression, discrimination, phobia, alienation, isolation, vilification are also places of discomfort... and yet and yet... (Smith 2023)*

Whilst I am conscious of the sensitivities of proposing that we can ‘learn from the US’ in the Dutch context, there is extensive US-based knowledge on safe space working and how to build equitable access in education that might be usefully translated to the situation at the ATD, albeit with the need to attend to differences. In US education, EDI and social justice contexts, ‘safe spaces’ are broadly defined as those that are primarily focussed on providing non-judgmental support. As Diana Ali discusses, although there are now many uses of the term, the notion of safe space originated in movement-building and educational contexts to describe the aim to increase ‘the safety and visibility of marginalized or oppressed community members’. Popularized by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013), the distinct notion of ‘brave spaces’ then emerged to denote environments where the aim is to safely facilitate challenging dialogue in ways that can be difficult and uncomfortable (Ali 2017). Brave space is defined by features such as “controversy with civility”;

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3 See for example <https://www.dutchamsterdam.nl/155-gezellig>

“owning intentions and impacts” and a clarity of contract among participants not to intentionally inflict harm on one another (Arao and Clemens 2013).

As Ali notes, the notion of safe space has been subject to attack in some quarters of US education as a supposed challenge to freedom of speech and for enabling students to retreat from perspectives that differ from their own (alongside and related to controversies regarding ‘no-platforming’ and the debate surrounding the relation between hate speech and freedom of expression which has also been very prominent in the UK). On the other hand, the value of safe spaces in higher education has been defended by others who argue that ‘students don’t fully embrace uncomfortable learning unless they are themselves comfortable’ (Schapiro in Ali 2017: 3). But as Ali points out, the conversation around safe space working often confuses at least two different kinds or qualities of safe space: those ‘allowing marginalized individuals opportunities to retreat from the very real threats and demands they face by their very existence’ (including in a context where a safe space gathering must take place at an undisclosed location) and ‘the kind of space to allow students to process new and uncomfortable ideas productively’ (3). In this context, naming the classroom as aiming to be a ‘brave space’ rather than a safe space is an important distinction for Ali in enabling participants to know what to expect and how to prepare for the kinds of conversations that might take place. But it also raises the question of how brave space can be made safer for marginalized students or how to provide equitable access to brave space. This is precisely the issue that Bojana Mladenović seems to be touching on when she articulates the double aims of the anti-racist and decolonial work within the SNDO program: ‘to make the school safer and less violent for *students of color* and a space of transformative (read: less violence inducing) learning for the *white* population of students, teachers and staff’ (Mladenović, emphasis added). As Mladenović acknowledges, the challenge from an intersectional perspective is also then to ask how this approach can expand to be attentive to other forms of structural oppression such as ableism and neurotypicality (building on the work that SNDO already does in relation to queer, trans\* and nonbinary inclusivity).

## II. Social safety at the ATD, AHK and the Netherlands

Social safety has been a focal point of discussion throughout the Academy since I began working there three years ago, and continues to be a recurring source of concern in relation to art academies and the wider arts and creative sector in the Netherlands (including when high-profile cases of inappropriate behaviour and abuse reach the attention of the media). In recent years, these include: the criminal investigation into sexual abuse allegations around the TV talent show, 'The Voice of Holland' (since January 2022)<sup>4</sup>; an article naming the conditions of Dutch art academies as producing unsafe working environments (December 2020)<sup>5</sup>; an advisory statement about transgressive behaviour in the cultural and creative sector including vocational art education issued by the Raad voor Cultuur (Council for Culture) (June 2022)<sup>6</sup>; and a controversial recent report based on research investigating transgressive behavior in the field of Dutch dance entitled *Shadowdancing* (2023)<sup>7</sup>. In March 2023, there was also controversy when the entire board of Mores, the reporting centre for undesirable behaviour in the Dutch cultural and creative sector, resigned due to questions about their credibility and independence<sup>8</sup>.

I am not in a position to provide a comprehensive summary of all the different activities and processes that the Academy has been involved in related to social safety in recent years. There has been a huge amount of work in this area at different levels in the institution and nationally: at the level of individual departments within the ATD; at Academy-level; at the level of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) to which the ATD belongs and at a national level where government bodies are also conducting research related to social safety in higher art education and nationwide consortia of art schools take joint sector initiatives. For example, in May 2021,

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4 See also a recent article on this case in the UK media: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/14/two-stars-of-the-voice-of-holland-charged-with-sex-offences>

5 See: [https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/43321\\_it\\_s\\_not\\_your\\_fault\\_how\\_art\\_academies\\_perpetuate\\_social\\_unsafety](https://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/43321_it_s_not_your_fault_how_art_academies_perpetuate_social_unsafety)

6 See the English-language summary available at: <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/adviezen/2022/06/21/summary-advisory-report-on-transgressive-behaviour>

7 The methodology and independence of the research underlying this report has been criticised within the Academy of Theatre and Dance and in other arts universities. See [https://www.verinorm.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Schaduwansen\\_23-05.pdf](https://www.verinorm.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Schaduwansen_23-05.pdf)

8 *Mores* was established in 2018 in the Netherlands in response to the #MeToo movement. More information about the context for the recent board resignation can be found in various press articles such as this: <https://nos.nl/collectie/13887/artikel/2468418-bestuur-meldpunt-ongewenst-gedrag-mores-stapt-op>



the Executive Boards of thirteen universities of the arts - including the AHK - issued a statement in order to signal their commitment to social safety as a ‘a crucial issue’ for the sector and to announce both joint work on a Social Safety Code and a collaborative venture to establish a national ‘Ombud’s office’ in the area of social safety in art education. Social safety was explicitly named as a theme in the *Sector Agenda for Dutch higher art education (2021-2025)*<sup>9</sup> and more recently, in May 2023, the Education Inspectorate of the Dutch government published a new study focusing on social safety in higher art and fashion education, titled: ‘Managing lasting social safety in higher art and fashion education - Enter (for) the conversation’. According to the government, the reason for this investigation was signals received by the Ministry of Education received in Spring 2021 “about an unsafe learning environment at art and fashion courses at various universities of applied sciences”. This 2023 report then aimed to inventorize the policy and processes that had since been pursued by university boards in order to provide a structurally safe learning environment for students in their schools.

At the level of the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK), which includes the ATD, the recent growth of social safety related activities and measures include: the appointment of a team of seven internal and external AHK Confidential Advisors (“*vertrouwenspersonen*”) - broadly equivalent to the role of the ombudsperson in other organisations such as the University of Amsterdam - whom staff and students can approach as the first port of call for social safety incidents (also in June 2022)<sup>10</sup>; and an updating of the legislation, regulations and Code of Conduct for Social Safety by the AHK (February 2023)<sup>11</sup>. In November 2021, an institution-wide staff survey was also carried out which included questions about social safety and undesirable behaviour. In the social safety category, employees were asked to score their level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as: “*I dare to be myself at work*”; “*I dare to stand up for myself at work*”; and “*I feel safe to give feedback to colleagues*”. In terms of undesirable behaviour, staff were asked to register if they had experienced various kinds of behaviour in the organization including: gossip, discrimination, unwanted sexual attention, verbal aggression, threat or harassment, physical aggression or physical violence, and bullying. They were also asked to rank how well organised the aftercare was of incidents of undesirable

9 See the English version of the agenda here: [https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/system/knowledge\\_base/attachments/files/000/001/274/original/Engelse\\_KUO\\_v1\\_15\\_11-21.pdf?1639663252](https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/system/knowledge_base/attachments/files/000/001/274/original/Engelse_KUO_v1_15_11-21.pdf?1639663252)

10 See <https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/about-the-university/social-safety/ombudsperson/ombudsperson.html>

11 See <https://www.ahk.nl/en/facilities/student-affairs/social-safety/>

behaviour. Whilst (as far as I am aware) the results were not published in the public domain, the findings of the survey were shared internally with departments providing a comparison with an average for the whole Academy and a national benchmark for vocational education. In April 2023, the Executive Board of the AHK then launched a new “Social Safety Survey” to be conducted among all students and staff by an external agency. The research and consultancy agency Verinorm (who also conducted the *Shadowdancing* report) was asked to conduct a study into social safety and experiences of transgressive behavior among employees, students and alumni of the AHK. The stated aim is ‘to monitor the current social climate’ across the six academies that make up the AHK and for the external agency to use the findings to make recommendations for improvements. “How do we foster a culture in which everyone feels safe enough to speak out and in which we dare to call each other to account?”<sup>12</sup>.

Within the Academy of Theatre and Dance (ATD), a process had already begun in March 2021 initiated by the then director with the stated intention to ‘improve social safety at the ATD’ following reports of multiple social safety incidents within the school, outside the building and on social media. During Spring and Summer 2021, a series of ‘away days’ and workshops were held for Heads of Department facilitated by an external organization, *De Federatie*, seeking to give space to articulate the painful experiences of the past; to encourage cross-departmental dialogue on social safety; and to arrive at a common framework that would leave enough scope for different departments to nuance the emphasis in the ways necessary for their specific communities of students and teachers. Within the DAS Graduate School, the six main priorities that emerged through follow-up conversations among the leaders of the Masters programs were: i) the issue of racism, experiences of racism both inside and outside the school and how to make clear that discrimination is not accepted within the institution; ii) gender inclusion and the role of inclusive language in social safety; iii) the possibility of aiming to create ‘brave spaces’ which foreground learning (and acknowledge that discomfort may be part of that process), as well as supportive, safe spaces; iv) the role of class and financial background in experiences of exclusion; v) decolonizing the curriculum and vi) the need for an expanded understanding of accessibility to include neurodiversity. Staff were then tasked to come up with a written articulation of emerging values that could be shared with the wider organization as the basis for future dialogues. Following

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12 This is the question posed in the formal internal announcement about the latest AHK Social Safety survey, entitled: “*Are You OK? Invitation for the social safety survey*” (2023).



Anthony Heidweiller's appointment as Director, the Academy has since published a school-wide manual "Social safety - What to do in case of undesirable behaviour for employees and managers" (June 2022); and conducted an inventory of how social safety is assured within the Bachelors and Masters study programs (in April 2022) and support departments of the ATD (in Dec 2022)<sup>13</sup>; as well as holding further facilitated sessions for staff to share knowledge and attitudes to social safety across departments.

Given the history of the organization, one of the notable features of both the ATD and the AHK is internal difference. The ATD, for example, is made up of multiple different departments ("schools" and programs) that have, over the years, developed their own values and ways of working, including their own approaches to social safety. The question of to what extent central Academy-level policy and practice is needed and in what areas is an ongoing matter of discussion. For the purposes of this writing, this situation of internal difference means it is difficult to generalize about social safety practice at the Academy. For example, the inventory mentioned above concluded that "there is a big difference in the extent to which attention is paid to social safety in the various study programmes". The inventory also usefully documented the varying approaches the programs have to student guidance, mentoring and feedback methods; it reports that "one program uses an intimacy coordinator"; while others offer students ongoing Consent workshops, Deep Democracy trainings, Gender Diversity Awareness training and Campfire Talks; and some programs have specific timetabled moments in their curriculum in which students can indicate whether there have been any incidents relating to social safety.

My observation would be that, over these three years and until the more recent events I described at the start, the focus at the ATD has been primarily on social safety as it occurs in the relationships between students and teachers. Less attention has been paid to social safety as a matter of concern for staff in their relationships to each other, their managers and to the senior management of the institution as a whole. Given the sheer quantity of new and historic cases emerging from students and calling for the attention of managers, this focus is understandable. Social safety cases involve a lot of emotional labour to varying degrees for all parties

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13 At the request of the then ATD Director Anthony Heidweiller, two internal inventories were made of social safety assurance in 2022 by my colleagues Gwenoële Trapman and Marijke Schaap. The inventories were made following interviews conducted first with the artistic director/training coordinators of the Bachelors and Masters programs; and then with the heads of the support departments such as Production, Technical and Education Support.

involved and new structures of care were and are still needed to provide staff and students with the support they need to work through a process which can otherwise be isolating and exhausting. I recall in a recent session on social safety for staff, one of the external consultants remarked that having a large amount of reports or cases was a “good sign” for an organization. Whilst our tendency is generally to frame the emergence of a case as a “problem”, he reminded us that the very act of reporting is an indication of a degree of safety in itself; a healthy organization, he suggested, is one in which people feel able to report when they experience undesirable behaviour. Of course, he was not saying that we want more cases; but that we certainly do want to know and hear about inappropriate behaviour when it is going on. Painfully, at the same time, recent years have also shown how harms have taken place in the Academy where the reporting system has either not been used or has not worked effectively to enable acknowledgment and healing.

### III. Two reflections

#### ***Do as I say, not as I do: social safety + performative contradiction***

Without wishing to undermine the value of policy documents and written procedures – which necessarily have their place in creating social safety in institutional contexts – they also tell us very little about how to actually practice it in our day-to-day interactions and relationships. What does it actually mean in our bodies to create a safer and more inclusive classroom; what does it actually feel like in the moment to moment to facilitate welcoming and belonging for every body in a space? Whilst Academy policy documents and codes of conduct include broad definitions of what counts as “inappropriate behaviour” or “social safety”, the real complexity of the work emerges as we try to relate these concepts and regulations to the messy complexities of lived experience where it can sometimes be incredibly difficult for receivers, doers and witnesses of harm to articulate and name differing accounts of ‘what happened’. A further consequence of this gap between written policy and practice is that it enables the frequent enactment of performative contradictions. It is all too easy to find ourselves in the position where we are ‘talking the talk’ of safety or accessibility but doing so in ways that are themselves unsafe or inaccessible. According to a ‘both/and’, rather than either/or logic, experience also shows

that it is perfectly possible for the most vocal social safety advocate to also be a perpetrator of bullying. It is perfectly possible to find yourself in a room where some people are talking about social safety in ways that feel profoundly unsafe for others. And this phenomenon - which can manifest as white saviourism, for example - also recurs where certain forms of diversity and inclusion leadership tip over into an authoritarian mode, including in relation to those who are sometimes conceived as the supposed 'beneficiaries' of the inclusive gesture.

*I remember... at a former theatre school I worked in, there was a colleague who had taken it upon herself to ensure that all staff had participated in Mental Health training. The idea was that the training would teach us how to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. At the time the training was being held, I was experiencing a period of acute anxiety and depression triggered by an intense period of organizational restructuring at the university. (Experiences of anxiety and depression have been part of my life since my early 20s). I tried to attend the training session but found it too difficult to participate due to my own mental health at the time. After I excused myself and left the workshop, the colleague cornered me in a public corridor to ask when I would be able to complete the training because it was compulsory.*

I have found myself in the situation of performative contradiction or facing inconsistencies of saying and doing more times than I can count – in different roles, with varying degrees of responsibility, including in the context of the *CHANGE NOW!* project itself. (Indeed, I am doubtless performing contradictions in *this* text itself – in the unwitting slippages between what I mean to say and what my words might actually do for and with different readers). As many of us have learned and continue to learn the hard way, a spoken commitment to principles of social safety, equity and accessibility is no actual guarantee of us having the necessary knowledge of how to practice those values in a specific context. For example, despite the good intentions of *CHANGE NOW!* to foster solidarity between European theatre schools on their transformation into safer and more inclusive learning environments, we know that the project itself also involved the production of events that were experienced as unsafe and harmful by participants.

### **“We are learning” (at whose expense?)**

In conversations around social safety at the ATD, and indeed in the context of the *CHANGE NOW!* project, I have often heard reference to the importance of feeling

safe to make mistakes. And rightly so. Mistakes are widely acknowledged in pedagogical contexts as the basis for growth and learning. In the context of the ATD, I hear reference to mistakes as part of a narrative of recognising the gap between ambitions and reality with regard to the capacity to hold space for a safe and inclusive learning environment; teachers and institutional managers like myself will refer to the need to embrace making mistakes as part of a learning process. “*We are trying, we are learning*”. And, of course, this makes sense at some level; but at the same time, this acknowledgment of not-knowing (or even of incompetence) when it comes to social safety or EDI, can also be used as a way to avoid being judged or taking responsibility for the harm that our mistakes can cause. We need to keep asking ourselves: who is learning from whom and under what conditions? How to avoid situations in which racialized students and staff are exhausted by supporting the anti-racist education of the white-bodied community; or where the burden of anti-ableist education is repeatedly placed on disabled colleagues? In research done in the US education context for example, ‘Students of color express that they are placed in positions where they have to combat systemic racism while simultaneously working to educate their peers – a situation that ultimately has an impact on their own socioemotional well-being (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000)’ (Ali 2017: 7).

*This is something I find I need to constantly attend to in my own behaviour: noticing the difference between moments when it is and is not appropriate to reach out to friends and colleagues with differing lived experience for advice; noticing the reciprocity of advice giving and taking; noticing when asking for someone’s expertise needs to take the form of paid consultation; noticing when I am putting others in the position of educating me when I need to educate myself; noticing the difference between asking for feedback and seeking approval.*

In the context of contemporary arts education this question of who is learning from whom is particularly complex – where, as educators, we need to engage in potentially uncomfortable reflection on to what extent it is appropriate to ask students to accept us as we are in a given stage of a learning process in relation to social safety and inclusion (and when we need to accelerate this process or move it outside the classroom through actively engaging in additional training, for example). On the one hand, this is complex because there is the simultaneous movement in many contexts towards a more flattened and reciprocal pedagogical model where it is no longer a matter of “the teacher teaching the student” (unilaterally), but of the

teacher facilitating a space of *co-learning*, in which they themselves are acknowledged as being in a process of learning (albeit still within a power dynamic where it remains essential to acknowledge differences and inequalities between teachers and students due to payment, assessment and so on). Nevertheless, the reason for embracing this reciprocal model is ultimately that it benefits students' education (for instance, through leading by example on a politics of knowledge beyond mastery and authority) and therefore is incompatible with practice that (however unwittingly) protects educators from taking responsibility for harming students on the grounds of facilitating their own learning. Students teach us; but they are not *there* to teach us. It feels like there is a subtle but important difference here in terms of a sense of entitlement and expectation. In its most damaging form, "*We are learning*" can be a form of supremacy where the lives and needs particularly of queer, trans\*, disabled, neurodiverse and students of colour are devalued at the expense of those of their teachers (albeit that they themselves may be from one or more oppressed identities). But, of course, the reverse is also true. Students can do harm as well as receive it, both in relation to each other and in relation to teachers and other staff in educational institutions. Just as students who experience harm through structural exclusions and discrimination are not immune from harming others.

adrienne maree brown's book *We Will Not Cancel Us* (2020) deals carefully with these issues: giving us the important invitation to 'practice accountability without punishment' (brown 2020: 10). brown encourages communities and institutions to ask the right questions about how to enable transformation in a context where we do not want to 'protect those who cause harm' but nor do we want to foster a punitive cancel culture (ibid., 6). In the *CHANGE NOW!* publication, my colleague Bojana Mladenović also touches on these challenges, announcing her preference for a culture of 'calling in' rather than 'calling out' – where harmful mistakes must be acknowledged and accountability is sought, but is not used as the basis for exclusion. At its heart is the fundamental acknowledgment that the majority of us will *both* receive and do harm and that we need to pay closer attention to how harm and healing can happen for all (ibid.,7).

# By way of closing:

## Practicing difference as a value; thinking alongside Rajni Shah

Above and beyond the social safety policy-oriented work and staff development activities that I have already described, there is some extraordinary research and practice taking place at the Academy that really brings me hope for the future and that I consider to be examples of best practice in terms of building more inclusive classrooms and working together towards a more socially just world in the arts and society. One way that transformation can and does take place at the ATD is through the empowered presence of queer, trans\*, non-binary, Black and Global Majority, neurodiverse and disabled artists, students, teachers and researchers leading projects in the school and shaping the agenda for the future. It was great that we could share many of these projects with *CHANGE NOW!* - both through the core sessions and the publication including: the work of Rajni Shah; the *Access Intimacy* project by Carly Everaert and Mira Thompson; *shy\*play* by aster arribas and antje nestel; *IPOP* by Elio Steffen and Szymon Adamczak; the work of Joy Mariama Smith and Bojana Mladenovic in SNDO, as well as the work of Edit Kaldor who facilitated the student program of the Amsterdam session. From my personal perspective, it is through these projects and the people who lead them that I have learned the most in recent years about what it really means to practice and embody difference as a value in arts education. Or again, I am grateful to these projects and people for continuously showing me *how much I do not know* and how – as a White person, as a straight cis, non-disabled, middle class woman occupying a position of power and responsibility in the institution – I need to be in a constant process of attending to my own assumptions and practicing listening more attentively to the differing lived perspectives of others, noting my own habits of falling into false universalisms and exclusive norms. These are people and practices that are helping me to get more skilled in feeling how and when racism, ableism, trans\*phobia or other oppressive mechanisms are at work in the spaces I inhabit; to take responsibility for naming that and working with others to address it. At the same time, as I've written elsewhere, following thinkers like Vinciane Despret: 'It is not simply that there are many points of view *on* the world. It is that a point of view *is* a world. Is a worlding. Alongside and in relation to others'<sup>14</sup> (Cull Ó Maoilearca 2023). So, as well as practicing

14 This is part of a text used for the voice-over of a recent short film made by the ATD Lectorate, which you can watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNJXDMbhX9w&t=1s>



how to dismantle the worlds we do not want, it is also about exploring where worlds overlap and how to build new anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-ableist, neurodiverse, queer and interspecies worldings together.

I would love to go into more detailed discussion about all of this great work, but that will have to wait for another moment. For now, I would like to close by sharing a few brief thoughts in response to the work of my friend and colleague, Rajni Shah. I have learned more, and more deeply than I can say from Rajni - who works at the ATD as a researcher and as a tutor on the THIRD program within DAS Graduate School. Their practice includes hosting listening gatherings, including 'Listening Tables', facilitating a 'Feminist Killjoys Reading Group', giving talks and publishing podcasts and writing including the recent book *Experiments in Listening* (2021) which was published with a series of print-at-home zines. It is difficult to summarise the great many lessons that Rajni's work has offered to me personally, to our school and to the themes of the *CHANGE NOW!* project<sup>15</sup>. Some of these lessons have felt and still feel good, some of them have felt and still feel difficult and uncomfortable, but they all feel urgent and there are a few that stand out as particularly important to mention here.

In the first instance, it relates to Rajni's practice of drawing attention to the form and conditions of interpersonal encounters; to the 'structures of dialogue and interaction' (Shah 2023) that shape the nature of what emerges in and as relationality; to all that is already in the room before anyone has said a word. In their focus on 'listening and gathering as creative and political acts': Rajni emphasises the ways in which *how* we gather (for instance, in public conversations) produces the 'content' of the gathering or what kind of gathering is possible and for whom, contra the dominant tendency in academic contexts to assume a false neutrality or egalitarianism of standard formats and containers (like the paper followed by Q+A). Questions of 'safety' and its relationship to listening and racism are an inherent part of this work - for instance, including in the practice of creating BIPOC-only spaces for listening sessions in an 'attempt to create a safer space for those who have experienced racialisation' (Shah 2023). When I opened this section by framing this work (perhaps bluntly) as 'best practice' in the Academy, I do not mean this to say that these are practices that have guaranteed social safety or were somehow 'risk-free'. Rather, I consider them best practice in the sense of being highly attentive to how, why and when the desire to create safety is and is not achieved in specific contexts – as in

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15 The recording of Rajni Shah and my contribution to the Warsaw session is available online here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe\\_La\\_YCXv4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe_La_YCXv4)

the case of some of the examples that Rajni discusses in their text for the *CHANGE NOW!* publication. As much as we might want to reach for ‘tools’, ‘methods’ and ‘strategies’ to improve social safety in our schools, it is clear that these are never recipes or blueprints with predictable outcomes.

Rajni’s work has already been and will continue to be very important at the ATD and particularly at DAS Graduate School for helping us to consider the politics of structure in the pedagogical context. For example, in contrast to the emphasis on the need to dismantle master-pupil hierarchies and authoritarian power dynamics in education in the Polish theatre schools context, DAS has already long since considered itself as practicing a horizontal approach to art education where Masters programs are framed as facilitating co-learning among peers - including as signaled by the naming of those who attend the programs as ‘participants’ rather than ‘students’. This horizontality is also understood as embedded in programs through the use of approaches such as the DAS ‘feedback method’ which aims to: ‘empower the artist who is getting feedback on his or her work, to go beyond the pronouncement of judgments, to allow fundamental criticism, to create a sense of (self-) discipline for the sake of precision and clarity, and, last but not least, to increase the enjoyment of giving and receiving feedback’ (DAS Theatre website)<sup>16</sup>. However, at the same time, there is also recognition that existing structures and practices cannot be fixed and need to be constantly reviewed and developed with and by the communities working with them, particularly in relation to their capacity to hold space for difference among participants.

In the context of the THIRD program, the presence of Rajni’s practice has also led to increased dialogue within the team about how supposedly ‘open’ educational formats can risk a kind of ‘structurelessness’ that is not in fact equally open for all and can encourage a return for some to certain unnamed, default behaviours. There is a sense of a need to pay greater attention to the experiences of processes and pedagogical structures that are framed as ‘free’ or ‘open’ to difference, as in fact being laden with unspoken and unacknowledged rules, codes, and expectations that can be exclusionary. We observe that dismantling hierarchies of knowledge needs more rather than less structure, and the need for a greater transparency of structure: or what Rajni describes as “clarity of container”. Informed by Rajni’s work, we have also discussed the shifting role of the tutor in peer-to-peer learning contexts as one

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16 For more information about the feedback method used in DAS Theatre, see: <https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/theatre-programmes/das-theatre/study-programme/feedback-method-1/>



of holding space as safely as possible in a setting where artists may be encountering each other from very different positionalities. This requires the development of skills in managing conflict, misunderstandings, mistakes and critique; being alert to emerging instances of harm or abuse<sup>17</sup>; and at the same time being aware of where the boundaries of the tutor role might end and when situations call for other forms of professional support. Likewise, it is also observed that, while recent tendencies in education in the Dutch context have shifted toward well-intentioned flexibilization and/or have long since placed a value on the empowerment of students to determine and take responsibility for their own learning trajectories, it can be that these practices are not as intrinsically empowering or equally empowering as they aim to be. For different and unequally distributed reasons, students may not have the *capacity* to take on this role in relation to their learning, and it could be that it is more empowering for some to in fact make *fewer* or *different degrees* of choices and decisions with regards to what they learn and how.

There is so much more to say on all of these topics, and so many other voices from our Academy that need to be heard on experiences of safety, much more so than mine. But for now, I want to close by expressing my gratitude to the CHANGE NOW! project leaders in Warsaw for inviting me into the project and for the opportunity to step into this research and reflection which has helped me develop my own learning in important new ways.

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# From the perspective of The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

*Hilary Jones*

This final paper from the RCS on the Erasmus: Change-Now! Project is written both as a response to the published survey which was commissioned by the Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw to interrogate historical abuse and discrimination in its community and to briefly outline current practices and policies which have evolved at the RCS since the inception of the original Change-Now! Conference held in Warsaw in October 2019.

As Change-Now! draws to an end, I'd like to begin by commenting on the unforeseen challenges posed during the timeline of the project: massive geo-political shifts caused by the Covid Pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, economic insecurities, the extreme effects of climate change, the aftermath of #MeToo, the rise of cancel culture, the killing of George Floyd and the politics of gender identity – have impacted our perspectives beyond all imagining. Theatre as a tradition and an art form has always reflected and commented on society and these events have been a catalyst for rapid and radical change in the way we train the next generations of actors. What has remained constant throughout the three years of Change-Now!

was the determination to dismantle the hierarchies that had allowed abuse in our industry and to establish an environment in which collaboration could flourish.

This desire to find a common purpose whilst respecting difference, embracing change whilst valuing and re-framing tradition is eloquently articulated by Agata Adamiecka in her introduction to the report: “The (non) Consent to Boundary Violations”. That radical reform has been necessary across European Theatre Institutions was very evident during the final Change-Now! Conference Warsaw hosted in March 2023. A rich and intense programme it provided a platform for many voices to document and share their own drama school journeys during the experience of, and post, Covid. Whilst some countries represented had long established protocols to deal with dignity at work and study, others were only just emerging from the stranglehold of decades of replicated and outdated practice. But there was a common thread in the active recognition of our world is shifting and the subsequent need (and willingness) to dismantle inappropriate structures of training in order to provide the best and most equitable strategies for learning .

My own institution – The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland – has long had established policies that address dignity at work and study with concomitant protocols to enable whistle blowing and the calling out of inappropriate behaviour including bullying whenever- and at whatever level – it occurs. Staff are trained in child protection (we operate a highly successful Junior Conservatoire as well as a Lifelong Learning programme) with all employees checked for any criminal record. Contracts are now issued with a raft of policies attached and departmental managers are responsible for appraising part time and associate staff such as directors, coaches and technical crew with regard to expected behaviors including active and in-depth anti-racism training.

The death of George Floyd in May 2020 brought to the fore issues of institutional racism and the activism of many drama students across the UK rightly forced our sector to re-examine processes and attitudes. At the RCS, this has resulted in a more representative and diverse staff across all departments and an ever-evolving set of anti-racist policies written and delivered by dedicated staff who have that lived experience. Helplines, anonymous reporting mechanisms, active by-stander training and continuous attention to appropriate speech and acceptable terminology and customs, all underpin the anti-racist ethos of the RCS allowing students and staff to understand and genuinely practice equity.

Intimacy Coordination – introduced to the Conservatoire in 2018, is now embedded into the curricula with a qualified IC brought in to choreograph all productions involving scenes of an intimate nature. Consent-based practice and boundary training is now an established part of our actor training, and it is customary practice that clear explanations of all physical exercises and physical contact in class are given in advance with permission sought from each student to ensure appropriacy and safety at all times.

We have a long established culture of student representation on RCS committees and policy making groups, an extremely pro-active student union with subsidiary branches to ensure the voices of previously under-represented communities are always listened to, and an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion department that funds small scale events to raise awareness and celebrate the many cultures that come to study with us. Recent examples of this include a series of podcasts exploring what dialect and identity means to our students of colour (June 2021) and the 2023 project 'All The Fun of the Fair' where two of our students who come from the Show People (Traveller) Community recreated a fairground environment in one of our large rehearsal spaces, giving a specially written performance to highlight the history, culture and years of discrimination their community has been subjected to.

Ten years ago, as part of our commitment to widening access, the RCS established a BA in Performance for students who are deaf or partially hearing. All staff and students in the School of Drama are given the opportunity to learn basic BSL (British Sign Language) so we might better understand the challenges and be able to communicate with the students in their own language thereby offering a genuinely inclusive experience. We have also over the past decade trained students with severe visual impairment and mobility issues including wheelchair users creating productions that genuinely integrate these differing abilities. It is a measure of their talent and determination that many of these trail blazing young actors are now actively working with major UK Theatre companies including The National Theatres of Scotland and England, The Royal Exchange in Manchester and The Royal Shakespeare Company as well as appearing in soap operas and adverts on television. In opening up our admissions to students who are physically and neuro diverse, we have not only become an institution that genuinely represents the real world and believes art is the right of every human being, but also found new ways of teaching and learning. Our movement and voice techniques can no longer be stale replicas of what we were taught decades ago but have evolved to become vibrant new methodologies that stay connected, responsive and relevant in a world – and profession – that is

embracing the seismic shifts of the past four years. Revolution and evolution sit side by side.

“The (Non) Consent to Boundary Violations” report commissioned by the Warsaw Akademia is a courageous – and in light of the report’s findings – necessary act determined to call out decades of known abuse that – as in the UK and US – had become normalised as a rite of theatrical passage.

The set of pro-active responses outlined to create a safer and more respectful teaching and learning environment, including the Internet Guide Bezpieczni, a commitment to developing and using Intimacy Coordination and the implementation of new assessment and feedback standards will be essential tools in tackling injustice and it is heartening that its publication has largely elicited a positive response with staff and students acknowledging – and I quote: ‘change is difficult but necessary’.

The report also examined the impact of the Akademia’s architecture, how certain areas are colonized by particular groups of students who create ‘territories’ and addresses the current ‘assessment culture’ noting the lack of robust feedback mechanisms, the boundaries of student/staff interaction and the (in)appropriacy of language used by lecturers, particularly when giving observational responses in a classroom environment.

The final set of recommendations focusses heavily on the need to deconstruct the master-apprentice model of learning and to implement feedback mechanisms which genuinely support ‘individualised and deep assessment’. This is crucial, not only for the student’s professional acuity and progress but also their mental well-being. After many years of engaging with different models of feedback, the RCS currently operates a system known as ‘mutually constructed feedback’ (MCF) where students are actively encouraged to write about their own development in relation to specific criteria of learning and learning outcomes. Feedback is a continuous process within every class, but MCF discussed in one-to-one tutorials at the end of each term, allows the student autonomy and opportunity to reflect on key moments of learning and express any concerns or challenges they may have. MCF’s operate in every strand of our drama training-acting, movement and voice to provide a comprehensive overview of progress whilst also allowing the inclusion of new strategies to resolve any difficulties. Weekly meetings with the staff team allow students to discuss any immediate concerns and in addition, two major programme meetings a year provide a more formal platform where students can document any aspect of their course delivery. Complaints are noted, discussed and acted upon timeously.

Before the pandemic, the RCS had two dedicated full-time counsellors. We now have eighteen. There has been an exponential increase post Covid of students with declared mental health issues. A raft of new measures including resilience training support those who find things difficult. We are an Institution with a high number of international students, those living away from home for the first time, those with differing physical needs or diagnosed with neurodiversities such as dyspraxia/dyslexia as well as students who may be negotiating their gender identity. Our student support systems are crucial in enabling each student to reach their potential.

Training actors today is so much more complex than exploring the heightened speech of Shakespeare (though we still do that of course). Students need, want and expect different models of learning and inevitably have alternative viewpoints growing up in a world that is so radically different to that of their lecturers when they were students.

The great Brazilian theatre pedagogue Augusto Boal once stated:

*Theatre is a weapon. For that reason, it must be fought for.*

The Akademia Teatralna has begun that fight with their report. I wish them well in the realisation of their 'victory' to an equitable, more sustainable and undoubtedly brighter future where both lecturers and students may flourish.

# **The (Non-)Consent to Boundary Violations.**

## **An overview of a survey on abuse and discrimination in the community of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw**

### **Edited by**

Katarzyna Szaniawska  
Agata Adamiecka-Sitek

### **Proofreaders (Polish)**

Monika Krawul  
Anna Hegman

### **English translation**

Aleksandra Paszkowska

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Edukacji i Nauki

### **Administrative and executive project management**

mgr Katarzyna Renes  
mgr Beata Szczucińska  
dr hab. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek

### **Cooperation**

Monika Przespolewska

### **Academic project management**

dr hab. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek



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