Safe(r) Rehearsals

Thoughts on facilitating creative processes that involve sensitive content

By Mark Pritchard

I had a conversation with director Ming-Zhu Hii this week around working in projects with sensitive subject matter. Ming-Zhu’s project is one of a few I’ve connected with recently that explore issues and experiences that are quite dark, potentially triggering, and sometimes difficult to leave in the room at the end of the day. When you’re investigating this material – be it as an actor, director, writer, dramaturg, or anyone – it’s easy to lose a sense of your own boundaries and how it might be effecting you. We’re doing work around content warnings and how we handle triggering content with our audiences, but not so much in the early stages of a project where the artists themselves might need support. I mention rehearsals in the title, but of course the process starts long before that, so we should really be looking right back at how we handle those first conversations at the genesis of a project.

Ming-Zhu asked me what processes or strategies people are using to safeguard artists in development/rehearsal rooms that involve sensitive and potentially triggering content. We noted how commonly this content comes up, and how seldom we see a process facilitated that allows cast, crew and creatives to address it well. With that in mind, I thought I’d draw together a quick list of things I’ve experienced or used which might be useful to someone else.

There is also a parallel conversation being led by Safe Theatres Australia around creating theatrical workplaces that are free of sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination. There’ll no doubt be some points of connection with the major work they’re doing around those issues, but I wanted to put a spotlight on this particular issue.

Please drop me a line if you want to chime in on this conversation, add a practice that might be worth having in the mix.

Some processes that have come up so far include:

- **Checking in and Checking out**: At the start and end of the day, the facilitator leads a routine process whereby every member of the team 'checks in' and 'checks out'. You do this by taking a moment to observe where you are at emotionally, energetically, psychologically at this moment of starting/finishing work. You might have had a rough night’s sleep, you might have just had an argument that you want to leave at the door, you might have drunk too much coffee, or you might be having issues come up around this project that are influencing your relationship to being here – for better or worse. Each person puts a number (1-10) on their status, and then gives a little explanation as to why – as much or as little as they want to say. Facilitators encourage each person not to judge their status – if you’re a 2, its good for everyone to know you’re a 2 – and that its most important to work from where you're at. The exercise is around self-awareness and open communication, and creating a ritual for people to enter and exit a process, leaving things behind where necessary, and picking things up when you’re ready. Do it every day, no matter what.
● **Start a project by talking clearly and openly about what we’re about to do.** Have a conversation on day one that identifies the kinds of territory we’re going into and what might come up for people. Name the fact that the material might be sensitive or triggering, and that we all need to be aware of the impact it might have on ourselves and on others as we move through it.

● **Set up some parameters around the conversation**, some guidelines or values for how we’re going to approach it. Have a discussion about how you might deal with things as they do come up, so that speaking up or stepping out of the room or calling a stop to something is understood clearly by everyone in the team to be normal behaviour. Ask the question of the group "What should we do when something comes up that we’re not comfortable with? How do we wanna deal with it?"

● **The traffic light system** might be useful for people to communicate their comfort/discomfort with something that’s happening. It has been used in fight choreography and intimacy coaching as its very effective in physical exercises and improvisation, and I’ve also experienced it in a devising workshop that dealt explicitly with bullying and sensitive lived experiences.
  - Green = I’m fine with this
  - Amber = Proceed, but let’s all be cautious and aware that it's tricky
  - Red = Let’s all stop immediately

● **Note that everyone wants to be green lights all the time**, and saying "Stop/Red Light" can be feel confrontational or difficult. But it’s important that everyone is comfortable setting their boundaries. You might like to run an exercise where everyone uses this language. It can become a fun language in a process, but we need to acknowledge any use of these terms with respect so that people feel believed and that the system will support them. As a facilitator, it can be useful to remind everyone that "You saying No makes it easier for everyone to believe you when you say Yes”.

Other resources to be aware of include:

**The Employee Assistance Program (EAP Assist)**

EAP Assist provides employees with confidential phone counselling support 24/7 in Australia & Overseas. Research indicates that the most crucial aspect of effective assistance is for it to be provided as quickly as possible with employees preferring telephone counselling above all other contact mediums. This service is generally free and anonymous to employees of companies that have signed up to it, from what I understand. Depending on the context your working in, this might be an option.

Again, this post is the start of the research. I'll keep adding to it as things come up, and would love to hear from anyone who has thoughts on and particularly any strategies they'd like to contribute.