

## WORKSHOP THEATRE & CONSENT

*A conversation on how to inform, communicate with and take care of your audience*

22.11.2022 | by Vera Bonder

### WORKSHOP

On the eighteenth of November, the opening day of What You See Festival 2022, the WYS festival gathered theatre companies and other interested parties and/or individuals in the online workshop called 'Content Warning.' People joining the workshop are here to learn and talk about Theatre and Consent. The host is theatre professional and researcher Jenny Wilson (she/her), who lectures and facilitates a conversation. Performance artist Paul(a) Chaves Bonilla (she/they) shares their research on the topic. The underlying idea of this workshop, is that consent is a responsibility of everyone: of the programmer, the artist, the audience. **Giving consent is built on a relation of trust.** From here a conversation can start on how to inform, communicate with and take care of your audience.

Nowadays, different conversations on consent have arrived in the Dutch context. Art is also mingling in this discussion, Wilson argues: "Art is countering the status quo." This is not an easy task. It takes time for social justice to be achieved. Throughout the workshop, the importance of context is drawn. To learn how a presenter of art is able to take their responsibility, multiple aspects need to be taken into account.

### FROM TRIGGER WARNING TO CONTENT NOTE

As a start of the workshop, Wilson explains her dislike towards the word trigger. "People can be triggered by the most random kind of things," she explains. Therefore, she prefers the word content. In addition, Wilson also suggests reconsidering the word warning, because it almost provokes an expectation of a problem. She prefers the word note. **Content note, arises out of this.** Wilson considers this "a note that something is present," something that you – the artist, the festival or the organisation responsible for the audience – think people "might benefit from knowing on beforehand." But what do we need to know before we use these content notes? How do we rightfully use them? Multiple times it is stressed, that content notes are developed out of the assumptions of people. You, the presenter or artist, assumes what might be traumatic, triggering or difficult for your audience. We all do tend to have socially accepted ideas of what is okay and what is not okay. Consequently, you come with your own experience and your own context: "You have your own bias," Wilson emphasizes. You need to be aware of your own accountability and your limitation. The audience has other relations to these topics. We tend to know who our audiences are, but do we really? And how do we genuinely get to know them?

### THE CONSENT COMPASS: ARISE

Wilson created a tool for navigating consent: **the consent compass**. The consent compass entails five core ideas: *Aware, Responsive, Informed, Specific, and Engaged*: combined emerging the word: ARISE. The first element, *Aware*, considers how all human beings have some degree of agency. We need to be aware that some have more power than others. This is present on different levels. First, this links to the binary world we live in and concerns issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ableism. Second, this concerns hierarchy issues: as the person programming or distributing the show, you have some power the audience do not have (this does not mean the audience has no power at all. The audience have the power to walk out, for example). The second element, *Responsive*, entails the idea that **consent is always responsive to the situation**: there is a possibility to change your mind. Consent is an ongoing question: if you said yes five minutes ago, it could be a no right now. As a spectator it is therefore good to know that you're always allowed to

leave a performance. *Informed*, considers that what we do and do not know. “You don’t know what you don’t know, until you realise you don’t know it,” Wilson explains. A question that arises in the workshop is for example: how much information is too much information? This element addresses the information you give your audience in advance, like the classification labels in film, but could also take shape in combination with an after talk or another form of after care. *Specific*, the fourth element, stands for being very specific about the what, where, when, how and whom. It concerns the boundaries of the consent you are navigating. This could entail content notes such as: “this performance entails homophobic encounters in the first part of the performance. They will be questioned towards the end of the performance. In the after talk there will be some time reserved for the sharing of your thoughts.” The last element, *Engaged*, is the reoccurring check-in if your audience is still here, if they are still present. How this is achieved is still a bit unanswered after the workshop.

## LEVELS OF CONSENT

Consent is operating on a range of levels, Wilson argues: self, inter-personal, social/group, systemic/cultural. She developed a tool for navigating consent, because **consent is more difficult than the simple transactional ‘Yes – No’**. The Self involves the following: the information that we give is based on the permission and consent we give ourselves. Inter-personal entails how we interact in one on one, or small inter-personal interactions. How do you make sure “everyone is consenting,” Wilson questions. The Social/Group incorporates the dynamics of a group. You need to be very mindful of the kind of peer pressure or social pressure that is possibly present. Do you dare to leave, to question was is presented? Chaves adds that is important to actively remind audiences of their agency; the codes of the theatre are very strong. The Systemic/Cultural covers socio-cultural norms, most who are not consensual in the first place, Wilson explains: “like patriarchy, capitalism or white supremacy.” This last level explains the necessity of the need of content notes: it shows the urgency of talking about difficult topics, otherwise we would stay in the status quo. I will come back to this point further in the article.

## ACTIONS & QUESTIONS

But how do you do this? There is no ‘one-fits-all’ strategy. Multiple examples are shared. Around her performance, Wilson opts for handing out leaflets with references to other information or help lines and organises support services around the performance. Before the performance starts she always stresses that it is okay to leave during the performance, but she invites the audience to stay in the room, and to trust her that she will not dwell in a certain triggering subject very long. After the performance there can be a space for people to leave their impressions behind, via notes, or someone dedicated to aftercare. Other suggestions consist of drop-down notes on websites (so people can choose to read them or not) and interactive content notes like organising after talks, Q&A’s or to propose informal conversations. Chaves very often includes content information in the performance itself as an artistic layer and proposes informal meetings, like a party, to be able to ventilate tension differently. On the so-called more individual side of offering content notes, ideas are suggested like providing handouts and putting up posters in toilets (where people are on their own, and are able to digest what is happening in their own time). We are facing the question on **how to and what kind of context and space does a performance need to make room for consent and possible effects of a performance.**

These ideas raise multiple questions: what about spoilers? How do we deal with resistance from directors and theatre makers who fear to lose their artistic freedom? Wilson responses she thinks you eventually gain what you think you lose. She asks directors: “Do you want to take care of your audience, or do you want them to feel bad?” Wilson argues there is a need for a significant cultural shift: “You need to put a new standard.” We also face the challenge of the safe space: what if we are so careful to not offend anyone, we are simply not engaging with difficult questions anymore? And

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what if we make mistakes, how do you deal with that? Like aforementioned in 'Levels of consent,' it is important to keep fighting the status quo and therefore keep engaging with difficult questions. If we want to change the world, fight capitalism, crush white supremacy and knock down the patriarchy, we need to face these difficult questions and topics. But, at the same time, it is important to stay aware of how others relate to this. Wilson explains that you will make mistakes. However, don't try to shift the fault to someone else. Thank the person for sharing their discomfort and ask: "how can we do better? How can we help you now? What do you need?". In the end, it's all about accountability and taking responsibility for the context you've created. All these ideas are considering having a 'before' and 'after': **the performance does not exist in a vacuum.**

The workshop serves as an opening to a discussion that has not yet finished. The proposition to use content note instead of trigger warning, the tool to navigate consent, and the different levels of consent act as a way to think about this topic. They activate us, make us stay aware of our own limitations when thinking about consent. The ideas and the occurred questions need to be ongoing. Let us keep asking these questions and maintain this conversation. To add contexts and experiences, what leads to a better way of understanding the audience. And in that sense, to take better care of your audience.

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