

Using Principles of Theatrical Intimacy to Shape Consent-based Spaces for Minors

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About the Author:

Kim Shively is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at Elon University where she teaches acting and directs. She is also Associate Faculty with Theatrical Intimacy Education and works as an intimacy educator, choreographer and coordinator. A member of Actors' Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA, Kim has enjoyed a professional career in Theatre, Television, Commercials, Hosting and Voice-over. Professional credits include work with Shakespeare Orange County, Laguna Playhouse, and the Asolo Rep; roles on *Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*, *The Young and the Restless*, *CSI: Miami*; and appearances in over a dozen national commercials both on camera and as a voice-over artist.

As a director, Kim has worked for various organizations developing and producing content. Recent directing credits include the university premiere of *Moment* by Deirdre Kinahan, *Trojan Barbie* by Christine Evans, *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe, and a world premier workshop of *The Inferior Sex*, by Jacqueline Lawton. Shively has also presented her research and led workshops for universities and organizations all over the country, including the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), North Carolina Women's Theatre Festival, and South Eastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Her pedagogical research has been published in *The Players Journal* (NIU), *Methods* (Pace), *Theatre Topics* (Johns Hopkins), the book *Objectives, Obstacles and Tactics in Practice: Perspectives on Activating the Actor* published by Routledge, and *Education in Theatrical Intimacy as Ethical Practice for University Theatre* with co-author Susanne Shawyer, published by the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Shively is co-author of the book *Applied Meisner for the 21st Century Actor*.

Kim earned a BFA in Theatre Performance at Chapman University and an MFA at the FSU/Asolo Conservatory.

When I began incorporating the best practices of Theatrical Intimacy Education (Pace and Rikard n.d.) into my undergraduate acting classes, I immediately saw evidence of the consent-based practices increasing the outcomes for bravery in student actors. Students were engaging with the work, utilizing tools for consent and boundaries appropriately, writing reflective pieces in which they were more clearly able to articulate their experiences. From the first time incorporating this work, student performers demonstrated these new skills developed in a consent-based environment. One student reflected upon the incorporation of consent-based practices:

The process also allowed us to protect our relationships and emotional lives. Our [creative team] had the wherewithal to understand that repeated intense physical intimacy could elicit emotions or feelings that were parallel to our characters but not rooted in reality. This was especially true as my scene partner and I became closer over the rehearsal process. We followed regimented choreography that eliminated curiosity to “go farther”, as well as an established intimacy call to warm us up into the reality of these characters’ sexual lives. As a result, at no point did I confuse my physical and hormonal responses with romantic feelings for my scene partner. This process supported full engagement and acknowledgment of those natural responses while preventing any sort of bleed-through of the dramatic world into reality.¹ (Anonymous, 2018)

The best practices for boundaries and consent joined beautifully to my pedagogical approach, which is rooted in a student-centered approach which empowers the actor to have a strong sense of self. It also provides a space where actors can continue to discover and develop their personal boundaries in addition to a solid, personalized acting technique. But the leap forward in student development was so marked that I returned to my research in adolescent neurological development for greater understanding.

From the beginning, I added tools from Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE)’s best practices like the self-care cue and boundary practice in the acting studio and rehearsal hall. As I already utilized ensemble practices like community agreements, these tools only deepened

¹ This quote is anonymized and published with the student’s knowledge and consent; quote is from a written reflection following the close of a production.

the consent-based practices of the ensemble. In the acting studio, I have always placed a focus on personal responsibility and establishing personal boundaries that clearly define where real life ends and the dramatic imagination begins. TIE's best practices gave even more specific language to how the young performer can practice *pausing* and *articulating* boundaries. By taking the time for students to establish their physical boundaries and training them to use open ended questions, their brains were making a habit of thinking through their boundaries and acknowledging the boundaries of others. These habits calmed down the areas of the brain that become activated when placed in heightened, pressurized situations. Because the work reinforced to students' brains and bodies that they were not in danger and they understood that their boundaries would not be crossed, they began to make bold, brave choices. Further, by introducing the self-care cue of “button” students took the responsibility to care for themselves in the studio space, rather than relinquishing this right.

The science behind this phenomenon has always been a focus of research in my pedagogical approach. The 20th century phenomenon of *neuroplasticity*—the brain's ability to change, reorganize and even repair itself—and how that connects to actor's impulses became a fascination when I was coaching actors for high-stress auditions. The presentation “Brain Plasticity: What is it and Why is it so Important” by Bruce S. McEwen, Ph.D (2014), illuminated the ways in which the brain is dynamic and pliable. As I continued to research the brain and its connection to the mind, I was led to the field of cognitive neuropsychology. While seeking to understand the mind of artists, who seemed to think differently than the typical subject, I discovered the beautiful world of neurodiversity. This consideration of the developing brain and the young artist began to connect dots between the importance of developing clear boundaries in the studio (or *laboratory*, as I call it, keeping the focus on experimentation) and utilizing a fully informed consent-based practice for artists.

Studies like the one explored in the research article “Fences of Childhood: Challenging the meaning of playground boundaries in design” (Pitsikali and Parnell 2020) demonstrate the need for boundaries in order to engage in play. Additional research from Dr. Stephen P. Becker

(2020), as well as research conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn and Dr. Elissa Eppel (2017), reinforced the powerful impacts of boundaries and consent on the developing mind. Dr. Stephen Porges's (2011) work with the polyvagal theory added additional and exciting depth to my understanding of the body's social engagement system, the flight or fight response, and its nuances for developing humans. In his book, *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-regulation* (2011), Porges illuminates the importance of understanding the body's adaptive response to potential danger:

A child's (or an adult's) nervous system may detect danger or a threat to life when the child enters a new environment or meets a strange person. Cognitively, there is no reason for them to be frightened. But often, even if they understand this, their bodies betray them. Sometimes this betrayal is private; only they are aware that their hearts are beating fast and contracting with such force that they start to sway. For others, the responses are more overt. (12)

Understanding the way that the adolescent mind may respond to perceived danger and how that response could potentially become a habitualized response encouraged me to research how to adapt the best practices of boundaries and consent for specific developmental stages among minors.

As I realized the importance of adapting these best practices, I knew that this work would revolutionize middle school and high school theatre and drama programs. However, in order for these best practices to have an ultimately positive and developmentally supportive outcome, I recognized the need to make adjustments based upon the cognitive development of the artists in question. The needs of a minor in a creative environment differ from those of the adult. Through research and experimentation, I began to alter the approaches to the best practices based on the developmental stage of the subject. While the foundations remained the same, the approach and terminology shifted. As we began to work with secondary educators at our workshops, it became apparent that bringing the best practices of Theatrical Intimacy Education to middle and high school educators was an effective next step.

Beyond educating those in positions of authority working with minors in theatrical settings, the profession must also continue to evolve in its preproduction, casting, rehearsal,

and execution stages. In her excellent book “Working Backstage” (2021), Christin Essin highlights New York’s IATSE locals 764 and the introduction of the position of *child guardian*. A relatively new position, Essin follows Broadway child guardian Bobby Wilson, noting that “Child guardianship is one of the least understood and least visible theater careers” (Essin 2021, 57). Essin explains the new position’s responsibilities, stating that the guardian “essentially serves as the child’s adult companion so that other professionals, including stage managers and directors, can treat them as full-fledged cast members” (Essin 2021, 58). The importance of this position in rehearsals and productions is unquestionable, though there was a fight to negotiate an official position and elevate awareness that this role is so much more than babysitting. In the film and television industry, child wranglers often report similar difficulties. Even the title of *wrangler* is rooted in labor that is focused on animals.

In order to move the profession into a space where minor performers and their guardians are fully informed and able to consent wholeheartedly, the industry must recognize the developmental, social and cultural implications for young performers. In-house minor advocates as well as advocates for any performers who may have their identities leveraged against them can begin to bring necessary change. We see this shift currently in more explicit breakdowns and recent contractual policies around intimacy. The addition of intimacy choreographers and coordinators has also heightened awareness and moved the culture toward a more ethical environment. However, with this awareness, the need for the development of more specific, age-appropriate practices is the clear path forward for those who work with minors in both educational and professional spaces.

Educational spaces, particularly those where students are adolescents or even young adults, often focus energy on bringing “real-life training” to professionally minded young performers. Preparing young performers for the industry is a necessary practice. However, practitioners must consider what exactly they are preparing the young performer for. Knowing consent-based practices is an excellent first step, but modifications for how these work with minors and even young adults must also be considered. In “The Road to Adulthood: Aligning

Child Welfare Practice with Adolescent Brain Development” the Annie E. Casey Foundation shares their recent findings that the brains of young people continue to develop well into their 20’s. This updated research replaced that of the late 20th-century belief that myelination, or full development of the brain, is reached by the age of 25. Additional consideration should also be made for early childhood development, neurological diversity, and the legal and ethical issues which surround working with minors. It is for this reason that I have spent the better part of four years adapting the research of boundaries and consent-based practices for spaces with minors and those for whom neurological development is also a factor. As I continue to train hundreds of practitioners each year in these approaches, I gain additional insight into the importance of this work.

Bringing these practices into the profession for minors and those who work with minors will make the industry a more ethical space for the most vulnerable members of the profession.

Empowering young performers to exercise their boundaries and educating those that work with minors on how to best serve those who will be the future of the industry is one of the most immediate ways we can ensure a more ethical future in the industry. By training young performers and those who teach them how to handle close relationships and giving them tools to engage in dramatic circumstances thoughtfully, we can prevent harm and trauma and create spaces for discovery and play that will place everyone at the center of their own experience.

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