

# ***Thought Bubble Theatre Festival: Applying and Developing Consent- Based Practices with Pre-Professional Actors***

**Alli St. John**

**About the Author:**

Alli St. John (she/her) is a theatre director, educator, and consultant based in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Alli has been working with young people in theatre for over ten years, serving as a preschool drama specialist, teaching artist and director for elementary through middle school students, high school theatre director, and intimacy director for university and professional theatre. Alli specializes in developing new plays with specific interest in Theatre for Young Audiences. Alli holds an MFA in Theatre for Youth and Community from Arizona State University, where she focused her research in building cultures of consent for educational theatre as well as the intersections of food in performance studies with intimacy, care, and generosity.



On the final day of rehearsal, the actors arrived with low energy. Our ritualized check-in process of assigning their energy a number between one and ten revealed that many of the students were experiencing fatigue, feeling overwhelmed by the semester, and navigating extenuating, stress-inducing circumstances (getting yelled at by a parking attendant certainly soured the mood of one performer). With this knowledge in mind, I offered a gentle stretching and meditation sequence as a warmup (pictured above). Students spread out on tumbling mats on the floor, and I guided them through an imagination and breathing exercise over relaxing music. For the remainder of rehearsal, we worked on specific moments that I, the director, felt needed attention as well as moments the actors wanted to look at. This rehearsal was full of laughter and fun. At the end of the night, I asked the actors to share their number between one and ten again to assess changes. The group started the evening at numbers ranging from

two to five, and by the close, they were all between eight and ten. Taking the time to respond to these student-actors positively affected their productivity and the group's collective well-being.

This example, taken from a recent directorial experience with undergraduate actors, shows how I decenter myself in the rehearsal room and hold space for students to come as they are. As a director and educator, I have a responsibility to listen to my students, respect their boundaries, and support them throughout rehearsal processes in a way that honors their autonomy as complete individuals. This final rehearsal reinforced the belief that considering actors' mental and physical state when leading rehearsals can significantly impact their experiences. Rather than pushing too hard in our final rehearsal and leaving exhausted and defeated, my actors left feeling energized and reinvigorated as they approached this final push to performance.

### **Theatre for Young Audiences, Theatre for Youth, and Educational Theatre**

As a theatre maker who primarily works with young people, I am interested in how the principles taught by Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) apply to the intersection of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and Theatre for Youth (TFY). These terms can be highly variable and depend on context and location, but generally, TYA refers to theatre created by professional adult artists for young or family audiences. TFY, on the other hand, refers to theatre with, by, and for young people, often facilitated by adults (see "Thought Bubble Theatre as Case Study" for a specific example of this distinction). Educational theatre, a

subdivision of TFY, specifically refers to spaces where students are learning who they are as artists and how they make theatre (it should be noted that I use the term “theatre” here specifically to mean the creation of a performance, whereas “drama” would suggest process-based play rather than performance). That is not to say that educational theatre is not concerned with the product. While educational theatre is generally focused on the processes of theatrical production (as seen in many secondary and university theatre programs), the final product often holds great importance. I have found that centering the learning process and student experiences still leads to highly meaningful and well-received final products. In my practice, I center the *experience* of making theatre and the lessons students can take with them into spaces that may or may not include theatre-making. Some of those key lessons are identifying and respecting boundaries, advocating for ourselves, and collaborating with others. As a director of TFY, I am often met with the question, “Why do you need intimacy directing techniques if you are working in children’s theatre?” In my decade as a theatre maker, I have seen that, regardless of the age of the artists, the process impacts the product. Teaching healthy, age-appropriate intimacy practices is vital to building a broader culture of consent, ensuring young people feel safe and empowered. These lessons will hopefully carry over into other aspects of student’s lives. Intimacy direction techniques are grounded in consent-based and trauma-informed practices, and therefore could benefit a variety of theatre-making communities and populations. To change the professional theatre industry, we must begin that cultural shift in educational spaces, starting with our youngest students.

I have been struck by the ways theatre making for young people is often minimized, or even excluded, in discussions of broader theatre practices. I am a theatre director, educator and researcher who combines practice and scholarship in my work, and I have prioritized investigations of TIE's best practices (Pace and Rikard 2020) in educational theatre spaces. Similar to other educators (Shively 2022) committed to utilizing TIE best practices, I found myself curious to explore how these principles apply not only in the classroom but also in the rehearsal space with a variety of learners. Building on this larger conversation about consent-based practices in education and working with minors, I combined TIE's best practices and the results of my own research to develop a set of suggestions (see addendum) for building a culture of consent in educational theatre spaces. Given these interests, I will share here the results of a multi-pronged case study situated within a TYA festival—Thought Bubble—that took place in Tempe, Arizona in March 2022.

### **Thought Bubble Theatre Festival as Case Study**

This investigation considers Thought Bubble Theatre Festival, a partnership between Arizona State University and the City of Tempe Arts in the Park program, as a case study to examine how theatre educators and directors build cultures of consent with pre-professional actors. Thought Bubble Theatre Festival is host to graduate student directors, TYA playwrights with new work, undergraduate acting students, and high school stage managers. Thought Bubble supports multiple levels of learning, and while this article will not focus on the logistics of the festival, this was a 12-month long project to bring free TYA to the Tempe community.

Consent-based practices can be traced through the rehearsal process, in which directors implemented my suggestions for building a community of care and culture of consent.

Both TYA and TYF have fought against the notion that they are something other than “real” (adult) theatre and, therefore, inferior (van de Water 2010). In educational theatre spaces, “theatre as utility” has long held that educational theatre serves as a means for socialization, group work, oral communication skills, self-esteem building, and imagination skill (Woodson 2010). As a theatre maker who works with and for young people, my aim is to highlight the values beyond the practical utility of TYA and educational theatre. Here, I highlight the pedagogy and practice in this unique intersection of educational theatre *and* TYA. While the educational components of this study do promote many of the “utility” qualities of educational theatre, there is also a less utilitarian goal at play. The research is centered on understanding how we build cultures of consent in educational theatre processes situated within professional-level theatre for family audiences. Within that prodigious question, I ask: How does each rehearsal space utilize the suggested practices differently? Do these practices actually make a difference in actors’ experiences throughout the rehearsal process? Through a combination of participant observation and interview data, I have compiled some answers.

I conducted Zoom interviews with festival directors and actors at two points during this study—pre-rehearsals and post-festival run. The pre-rehearsal interviews with directors and five festival actors focused on each individual’s understanding of consent and their history of working with consent-based practices. As a marker of sound qualitative inquiry, a signal of

---

consent, research collaboration, and to better center student voices, I have pulled some of their responses (and edited lightly for clarity) so you can hear directly from them.

In pre-rehearsal interviews, actors shared that none of their previous theatre teachers or directors discussed consent or its role in the rehearsal process before coming to ASU. They noted that this was absent from their high school theatre education. Actor 1 shared, “Not so much, no... at least not when I did theatre in high school” (Actor 1) and Actor 2 stated, “[At] ASU... we talked about boundaries and [ASU professor] did the whole intimacy workshop... but in high school, no” (Actor 2). I found it unsurprising, but nonetheless disappointing, that none of the actors experienced a rehearsal process that openly discussed consent before arriving at ASU. In my previous research (St. John 2019), I found that many high school educators care about consent in their classrooms, but they don’t know how to make it a core value of their practice. These conversations reinforced the need for resources and support for young actors.

Students highlighted that many directors they worked with encouraged actors to address concerns and were respectful of their physical boundaries, which led to a more supportive and safer environment throughout the rehearsal process. Although consent was not referenced directly in these spaces, it is apparent that the principles and values were still present.

Actor 1: I’ve had a lot of directors and teachers that have told me, if we have any issues or concerns to come to them directly, and let them know and not be afraid to talk to them. I think that’s probably the number one way that they’ve made me feel comfortable in a theater setting.

Actor 2: If it is a production that involves intimacy of any kind, just having like, people talk about their boundaries makes me feel a lot safer. And it helps me feel safer too, because then I can say, Hey, you can't touch my neck... So yeah, just making sure there's a conversation about it and having a check in.

Responses supported daily check-ins as suggested practices. That ritual is a time for the ensemble to share how they are, what they need, and what they can bring to the rehearsal that day. This is an opportunity for directors to make themselves available to actors and listen to their needs. The check-in is not only important for actors but also for directors. The physical presence and attention signals to actors that the director cares and is on their team. My previous research (St. John 2021) highlighted that students often feel like they are working *for* a director rather than *with* a director. The more collaborative a creative process is, the more likely actors will be open about their needs. Transparency from directors and teachers was another major point of conversation. These actors feel more supported when directors are transparent about their practices, expectations, and vision for the project. Check-ins demonstrate a level of care that encourages actors to be honest.

Students had an opportunity to share anything they wanted me to know about their experiences with consent in the rehearsal room. This opened up conversations about actors' comfort and safety coming second to the artistic quality of the production, the expectation to "leave it at the door," and the importance of ritualized check-ins. These preliminary interviews showcase the understanding of and experience with consent held by a group of artists with diverse backgrounds. Actors shared, "I think sometimes, an actor's [comfort] is often cast aside for the sake of a better scene or show" (Actor 1) and "I personally hate the phrase 'leave



everything at the door’... cuz that never happens, like you can’t cut it off” (Actor 2). As rehearsals began, I was confident in the directors’ comfort with the resources provided and the actors’ desire to experience a consent-forward rehearsal process. I was struck by this phrase, which felt familiar to me: “Leave your life at the door.” In all theatre, but especially in educational theatre, it is vital we do not forget our humanity and our basic needs. If theatre artists adhere to a culture of consent, the director’s job goes beyond the artistic vision of the piece: there is a responsibility to the entire ensemble. In educational theatre, our actors are students. We cannot expect them to behave as professionals, because they are not. Students need a safe and supportive environment to discover their identities as artists and people, be it in the theatre industry or in other facets of their lives. We all deserve the right to be ourselves and honor our circumstances on any given day. While directors may aim to create a rehearsal environment in which actors may leave their outside lives at the door, it is not reasonable to expect human beings to turn off their lives for hours and fully devote their attention to the work of the rehearsal. This does not mean rehearsal should be derailed because of actors’ personal lives, but it does mean that leaders can hold space for individual experiences that enter the room. An actor’s commitment to the project should not come into question if they are having a hard day, just as a director’s commitment would not come into question. Our human experience deserves space in creative processes that are often *about* the human experience.

### The Process

While Thought Bubble Theatre Festival included three productions, given this essay's scope, I would like to focus specifically on my practice as both a festival leader and director.

1. We began our rehearsal period by creating a community agreement; this was a collaborative process in which the whole team discussed how we wanted to work together and set expectations for this project.
2. I lead a consent training for my cast of 5 actors, utilizing many activities from *Staging Sex* (Pace 2020).
3. As stated in our community agreement, actors were encouraged to stay home from rehearsal if they did not feel well. Especially with the Omicron variant at its peak after winter break, I encouraged my actors to miss rehearsal if they felt sick. They also took this policy to apply to mental health days. As busy students with homework, projects, jobs, and life to attend to, we had the flexibility in our schedule to allow for absences related to self care and mental health.
4. We built flexibility into the rehearsal schedule and made decisions to cancel rehearsal entirely (or meet for a shorter length of time) if we didn't feel that it was necessary to meet.
5. In the spring, we encountered an unexpected situation in which an actor needed to be home with family in another state for a few weeks. They successfully participated in rehearsals via Zoom and rejoined us after spring break for tech and performances. While this was not an ideal situation and put some strain on me and the cast, ultimately, I felt it was the right decision to honor this actor's needs and the work they had put into the project. While this is one unique situation, it demonstrates that it is possible to be flexible with students' needs and still have a successful result.
6. We began every rehearsal with a check-in, as per my suggestions. Feedback from actors supports my belief that this ritualized opening offers a space to be heard and set the tone and expectations for the day.
7. I staged *The Box* collaboratively with my actors, making space for everyone to try their ideas.
8. During the festival, I provided water, ice, sunscreen, big spray, hair ties, electrolyte powder, snacks, and other care items to support the actors and festival team throughout the day.

This insight into my practice highlights how a variety of theatre-making efforts, including professional, quasi-professional, community, and educational theatre, can still have a successful product when we center care throughout the process.

After the successful run of Thought Bubble Theatre Festival, during which we served nearly 500 Tempe community members, I conducted a second round of interviews. These conversations centered around the actors' experiences with the consent-based practices their directors implemented in rehearsals.

Students shared that they felt respected by their directors, especially when it came to time management and recognizing that the actors had lives beyond the production. This is critical for educational theatre, where actors are students, often juggling school work, jobs, and family commitments in addition to their responsibilities to a show. Thought Bubble participants were paid a small stipend, but more commonly, student actors are unpaid. Actors also noted that they felt the consent-based practices led to a safer rehearsal environment in which they could trust their cast mates to respect boundaries.

Overall, actors reported a greater sense of comfort and safety in their rehearsal spaces, stating, "I feel like having the community agreement [was useful]... I don't know how to explain it but I feel safe here" (Actor 4) and "I always felt safe in rehearsal... so if anything, there was a lot more care for what we were doing with our bodies in rehearsal" (Actor 3). The community agreement was a successful tool not only for the directors but also for the actors. There was a sense of community and ensemble through the use of these suggested practices that had a positive impact on actors' experiences.

The consent-based practices led to a more positive and supported rehearsal environment compared to students' past experiences. Actors got into the practice of asking

permission before touching each other, communicating expectations, and sharing creative investment.

All of the participating actors reported a positive difference in their rehearsal environments compared to past projects. “I knew what the director expected of me and the director knew what we expected of her. It didn’t feel like the director talking down on us all the time” (Actor 3). “It was nice to work *with* a director rather than under a director” (Actor 3). The open environment, collaborative nature, and security in knowing they would not be touched without permission led to an increased sense of comfort throughout the rehearsal process. Students reported that the consent-based practices led to a greater understanding of physical, emotional, and professional boundaries.

Actor 2: So I always asked before touching. Everyone did pretty much. And I guess she did pretty good rehearsal schedules. I feel like this is part of honoring our autonomy with your time and stuff. It is better than other places I’ve been, as far as that goes.

Actor 3: And [she] was just very conscious of the state of our mind and body, which was very helpful, because I didn’t feel like I had to, I mean, I still had to put in work, but I didn’t have to overextend myself to any degree, I could just come as I am. And she’d be like, as long as you’re in the moment, and you’re listening to what I’m saying, that’s fine.

Actor 4: Well, I was never touched when I didn’t want to be touched. So that felt really good. I think the check ins at the beginning of [rehearsal] were really helpful. And I genuinely feel like you took the numbers that we gave into account as to like, to see what we would do during rehearsal. If most of us were at a two, it would be a relatively easy, stress free day. But if we were all pretty high, we would do a lot that day. So that really helped. I noticed and I appreciated that. And I think I also felt comfortable coming to you if something... I never had anyone make me feel uncomfortable, but I would have felt fully comfortable coming to you if someone had made me

uncomfortable.

The above quotes indicate that actors felt seen and validated when directors took their check-ins into account when planning the work for the day or when offering notes. Interviewees also noted that a positive work environment was created not only by the director, but the entire acting ensemble's commitment to the consent-based practices. It became apparent after talking to the interviewed actors that many people do not want to be touched. Actors have a reputation for being extremely comfortable with physical touch, but this is not the case for everyone, proving again why asking for consent is crucial, especially in a professional work environment like a rehearsal. Recognize the ever-changing nature of being human. This was a key factor to build a culture of consent where everyone felt like they could enter the space without apology.

After experiencing the suggestions for building cultures of consent in their rehearsal processes, the five interviewed actors recommend these practices, either in part or as a whole, asserting, "Yeah, I would say it would probably be best for most situations, especially with high school" (Actor 2), and "...other than being fun, I think it also clarifies expectations... and I think they generally made me feel good" (Actor 3) and "I think it should happen everywhere with everyone at all times" (Actor 4). Their positive experience with these practices signal that they are valuable in the rehearsal room, educational or otherwise. Clear pathways of communication, mutual expectations, and boundary check-ins promote a healthy work environment that we all deserve. One actor noted they would have felt more supported by

concrete opening and closing practices built into the rehearsal. They also mentioned they would have liked more director-led warm-ups. Actors also shared that they wished these practices were available in other areas of their creative practices, such as on film sets. This reinforces the important work intimacy directors and coordinators are doing in the professional film industry, and I am hopeful that film schools and student film projects will take note and implement consent-based practices in their work as well.

### **The Takeaways**

Although I intended for Thought Bubble to function as a test case for my ongoing research with implementing cultures of consent, it became clear after completion that the event succeeded in that goal while also providing an artistic home to many people. Three directors, three playwrights, twelve actors, three stage managers, and three designers played key roles in the success of the festival through their artistic contributions. Directors gained experience in consent-based practices and took away new skills to add to their creative processes. Actors learned to identify and honor their own boundaries, advocate for themselves in a rehearsal process, and perform for family audiences in an outdoor setting. Our production manager found a research interest in teaching high school stage managers and is writing her own report about that experience. Those three high school stage managers, some of whom had never stage managed before, gained professional experience in stage management and left with tangible tools to carry with them to their next production. The sheer volume of people it took

to make this festival a reality is staggering, but it is also a testament to the value this type of event has in the community.

So, how *do* theatre educators build a culture of consent?

1. Theatre artists have to commit to centering consent in their creative processes and check in with themselves regularly throughout the process to hold themselves accountable. It's easy to fall into a familiar way of working that is rooted in traditional power structures and does not support student well-being or learning.
2. Be transparent with students about where you are in your own learning and goals for the group. Have open lines of communication throughout the process, starting with the audition announcement all the way through performances. Demonstrate through your actions that you prioritize consent and student voices in the spaces you lead.
3. Center student voices and share the power in the room. We learn through experience. Our successes and our failures are invaluable lessons that make us better artists and humans. Let students try things, allow them to make mistakes, and guide them to learn from it. Students want to create art *with* you, alongside you, under your guidance, but not *for* you. Give them ownership over the process and the product.

These three items are broad in meaning and impact. My suggested practices offer a more detailed point-by-point approach, but if artists can center these three values, the creative learning environment will be more consent-forward and help students feel supported in their creative growth and learning. Much of the pedagogy around theatre education supports process over product (Woodson 2010; McAvoy 2019). Students are better positioned to create freely and learn from the experiences when they work alongside teachers or directors rather than serve the artistic visions of directors. In turn, this leads to meaningful and successful products. These three points situate the learning process as a priority and highlight how consent-based practices support student learning and growth.

In the beginning phases of this project, there was confusion as to why I was studying “intimacy directing” with TYA shows that have minimal physical contact between actors. I

asserted then, as I do now, that these practices are not exclusively meant for intimacy directing but for culture and community building. Any group of people assembled to work together deserve to be supported within the community they belong to. These practices are meant to do that work in educational theatre classrooms or professional settings. As we encountered challenges beyond our control during the festival, our sense of community and trust pulled us through and made each event a success.

We are at a pivotal moment in theatre education in which we have to lead the change we want to see in the larger industry. Instead of teaching young actors that honoring their autonomy will label them as “difficult to work with,” we have a responsibility to support them in understanding their own boundaries and respecting those of others. In order to see actual change in the theatre community around issues of consent and actor safety, we have to train the next generation of artists to accept no less than consensual conditions in the workplace. This becomes complicated when many artists' workplaces are underpaid, uncompensated, or unprotected by an HR department or unions (in the case of amateur or educational theatre spaces). The lack of employer-provided advocates or access to unions in the theatre community is a larger issue than this study covers, but it leads me to consider the importance of building cultures of consent on an institutional level. To better protect and support artists, leaders need to prioritize consent culture. Fortunately, many artists, educators, and institutions are prioritizing this work. Momentum Stage and Intimacy Directors and Coordinators are two such organizations offering workshops and other resources around consent and intimacy in the performing arts classroom, as is TIE's newly launched Educator Advocate Program. As we



reshape theatre education to reflect these consent-based practices, young artists will not and should not accept anything less. Artists must feel safe in order to do their best work, and that means building a culture that does not promote fear of physical or emotional harm. This is not easy or quick work, but it is necessary to create a more consensual theatre community where artists can grow and thrive.

### **Addendum: The Suggested Practices**

#### **1- Transparency in Audition Announcements**

When writing audition announcements, state clearly which characters will be expected to perform theatrical intimacy and note the other characters they'd be performing alongside. Be clear about your flexibility with that intimacy—is it set in stone or is it possible to use creative storytelling if the actor is uncomfortable with the intimacy? In addition, include content warnings about potentially uncomfortable or vulnerable topics. This is an appropriate space to disclose any expectations or requirements for actors, regardless of whether intimacy is involved in the production.

#### **2- Equitable and Accessible Audition Practices**

When planning auditions, consider offering students other modes of showcasing their talents beyond memorizing and performing a monologue. For accessibility reasons, I provide audition sides ahead of time so students can familiarize themselves with the content. Not all students process in the same way; therefore, it is more equitable to provide ample time for students to review the material. Try different activities during auditions that showcase students' ability to work together, take direction, make creative choices, and improvise. This may provide you with more information about a student while simultaneously affirming students in their abilities and aptitudes more than a traditional audition format.

### 3- Questionnaire

Create a questionnaire for students and the production team to fill out early in the rehearsal process. You can make time for this during rehearsal or have students complete it at home. Some suggested questions include:

- a. Do you have any health concerns (mental or physical), injuries, or limitations you want to share with us that you feel will help you be more successful in this rehearsal process and production?
- b. Are there any specific places on your body that you do not want to be touched in addition to the pelvic area?
- c. Do you have any safety concerns/fears that we need to be aware of, such as heights, stairs, ladders, claustrophobia, rotating floors, or anything else?
- d. Do you have any specific accessibility needs? (snacks, extra time to read, larger print script, memorization assistance, transportation needs, etc)
- e. Is there any other information you wish to share with us that will help us support your learning and success in this rehearsal process?

Questions should respect students' privacy but also give them an opportunity to share information that will help keep them safe and respected throughout the rehearsal process.

### 4- Community Agreement

In an early rehearsal, create a community agreement with the cast and production team. Instead of presenting students with a list of expectations and rules, build them together. Include students in the process to level the power structure of the rehearsal room. Give students agency over how they will work together. The community agreement should include some basics, such as behavioral expectations, respect for boundaries, and any specific

considerations that students need to feel comfortable or heard. Setting procedures for handling a breach of the agreement can be difficult, but it is a necessary part of the process. How are students expected to manage conflict? How should they report if they need assistance in managing a conflict? What safety measures are in place to respect student boundaries?

### 5- Opening Rituals

Create an opening ritual to begin each class or rehearsal. I come to the first day of class or rehearsal with a few suggestions, but I also make space for students to suggest practices that work for them. I recommend a “temperature taking” activity that will cue you into the emotional and physical landscape of the group each day. For example, I invite students to share how they are on a scale of one to ten. If the group is largely sharing lower numbers, I may do a gentler warm-up activity and less intense work during the session. On the other hand, if the group is sharing high numbers, I may use that time to do more physically active or involved scene work. Either way, knowing where students are at the beginning of rehearsals allows me to adjust my plan to support their needs during our time together. As with most things, this check-in is an invitation, and nobody is required to participate (and a student opting out of a check-in can be equally informative for me). After you have completed the consent training (8) and actors are aware of each others’ boundaries, consider including a quick boundary check-in with the opening ritual. This can be as simple as, “Today I am at a seven and my boundaries have not changed” or, “Today I am at a seven and I am adding a fence to my left shoulder for the day.”

## **6- Cast Discussion**

Talking about consent and staged intimacy should not be reserved for the actors directly involved in the intimacy. Consent affects all students, and they will have questions about how certain moments of the play will be handled, even if they are not in those scenes. Transparency is key, and this is a good time to return back to the community agreement and go over behavioral expectations for the rehearsal. Students might ask: What type of intimacy will be included in the show? Who will be involved? What will the intimacy look like? How will we stage it? Even if there is not anticipated intimacy in your production, consider having a conversation about consent and the role physical touch will play in the process.

## **7- Create a Self-Care Cue or Gesture**

As a group, establish a Self-Care Cue (Pace 2020) or gesture (or both) that actors or anyone else in the space can use if they need to step away from the work. A gesture is useful because not everyone can verbally communicate if they are in a heightened state of emotion or panic. Give options for where they can go if they need to leave the room and designate someone who will check on them if they are not back within a certain amount of time. TIE utilizes the word “Button” as part of their practice as well as a double clap, and I find that to be useful as a starting suggestion. Your cue should never come up in the script.

## **8- Consent Cast Training**

This is a 60-minute version of a cast training sequence. This can be shortened or expanded depending on time constraints and the size of the cast. The purpose of this training is to allow actors to establish their own boundaries and learn their cast mates'. Building familiarity and trust within the cast is important before beginning a rehearsal process. Remind students that they may use their self-care cue or gesture during this training. For more in-depth details on how to lead Simon Says with a Twist, Go, or boundary practice, see the book *Staging Sex* (Pace and Rikard 2020).

*Phase One:* Games to practice “no” and active listening

Simon Says with a Twist: In this twist on the classic game, invite students to say “no” to Simon, offer alternatives, and use self-care cues or gestures when prompted to do something unsafe or undesirable (Theatrical Intimacy Education).

Go: This game invites students to consider our own assumptions about giving and receiving permission, practice active listening, and combat the physiological response to give immediate responses under pressure.

*Phase Two:* Partnered work to understand boundaries

Boundary Practice or Touch and Permission: This activity is most effective when participants have an opportunity to partner with everyone in the ensemble, rather than

just one person. Students consider their own physical boundaries, learn that boundaries are circumstantial and contextual, and discover the boundaries of their fellow artists. This longer initial exercise supports students in continuing conversation and communication down the line when they work with content that suggests physical touch.

*Phase Three: Put it all together*

Improvised Movement: Play some light, fun music. Invite partners to move or dance to the music individually. Then, in pairs, begin to improvise movement together without making any physical contact. When the director (or whoever is leading the training) says “touch,” partners make physical contact while continuing their movement. They can explore space, levels, etc. The director may alternate calling “touch” and “don’t touch” throughout the activity. When the group is ready, they can improvise contact without the dictation of the director. Offer a 30-second heads up to allow partners to find a natural conclusion to their shared movement.

### **9- Identify moments of physical touch**

Take a second pass at the script. In addition to the scripted physical intimacy, note moments with emotional intimacy and vulnerability as they can similarly impact students. Prepare to converse with students about how they can do vulnerable work without putting themselves at risk of harm and how you plan to support their learning through this process.

### 10- Revisit Touch and Permission or Boundary Practice

Revisit the boundary exercise from the cast training, this time specifically with the actors involved in the physical touch being rehearsed. This can become a ritual that occurs before any rehearsal or may only be used when the group feels necessary. Remind students that boundaries can change from one rehearsal to the next. We are different people all the time, changing from moment to moment throughout the day. What was okay yesterday may not be okay today.

### 11- Choreograph the Intimacy or Moments of Touch

There are a couple of approaches to take when it comes to choreographing intimacy, but the general agreement is that it should be choreographed with as much precision as a dance or a fight. I stage intimacy collaboratively with actors so they have a sense of control and ownership. If they have an idea, they describe what they want to try, receive consent from their scene partner, and move through the proposed blocking slowly, beat by beat. If it feels good, we try it again at a faster pace. If someone else has an idea, we try that, too. Then, we decide what we want to commit to the choreography of the scene. This is a great place to utilize the ingredients for staging intimacy in *Staging Sex* (Pace 2020).

### 12- Closing Ritual



A closing ritual at the end of an intimacy rehearsal can be useful to seal the work. Especially when actors are working from home, there needs to be an opportunity to distance oneself from the work before moving on with the rest of the rehearsal or the rest of the day. Even when working in person, leaving the physical rehearsal space does not always shake the interior feelings built up during rehearsal. A series of different sensory practices help to ground actors back in reality and leave the world of the play behind. We might shake it out, yell into the void, drink water, take calming breaths, power clap, or combine these things. The closing ritual can be anything and should be developed as an ensemble, but it becomes most effective over time, as our brains begin to associate the act as a marked transition between literal or metaphorical spaces. Conclude by thanking the actors for their work and vulnerability, recognizing the parts of themselves they have shared that day.

### References

- Mary McAvoy (2019): Theater arts, global education, and policy; or, what Chance the Rapper taught us about arts education, Arts Education Policy Review.
- Noble, Adam. 2011. "Sex & Violence: Practical Approaches for Dealing with Extreme Stage Physicality." The Fight Master.
- Pace, Chelsea. 2020. Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pace, Chelsea and Laura Rikard. n.d. *www.theatricalintimacyed.com*.
- Shively, Kim. 2022. "Using Principles of Theatrical Intimacy to Shape Consent-based Spaces for Minors." Journal for Consent Based Performance (1).
- St. John, Alli. 2021. "Consent and Staged Intimacy in High School Theatre Programs: A Qualitative Study with Real Life High School Theatre Students." Unpublished.
- St. John, Alli. 2019. "Don't Kiss Me Kate: Intimacy Directing for Young Actors." Unpublished.
- St. John, Alli. 2022. "Dismantle the Hierarchy: Best Practices for Building a More Equitable, Consensual Theatre Classroom." Howlround Theatre Commons.
- Van de Water, M. (2010). Constructed narratives: Situating theatre for young audiences in the United States. Youth Theatre Journal, 14(1), 101–113.
- Woodson, S. E. (2010). Creating an educational theatre program for the twenty-first century. Arts Education Policy Review, 105(4), 25.