

# MARKET RULES

US theatre now prefers to play it safe rather than risk controversy and alienate the mainstream, says playwright **Christopher Shinn**

The question of self-censorship came to prominence in 2006, when New York Theatre Workshop, a major non-profit theatre widely viewed as politically progressive, cancelled a planned production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* at the last minute. Weeks before the production was to travel from an acclaimed run in London at the Royal Court Theatre to the East Village for a stint at the Workshop, the theatre (depending on whom you believe) either postponed or cancelled the play. Jim Nicola, the artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop, told the *Guardian*: 'In our pre-production planning and our talking around and listening in our communities in New York, what we heard was that after Ariel Sharon's illness and the election of Hamas, we had a very edgy situation. We found that our plan to present a work of art would be seen as us taking a stand in a political conflict that we didn't want to take.'

The theatre then made an unconvincing attempt to backtrack from this statement in the press – the production was delayed because the size of the set used in London would not fit into the Workshop's space, the personnel didn't have the proper visas to work in the US etc. There were other, only

slightly more defensible rationalisations, including that the Workshop wanted more time to organise post-show discussions that would include voices seen as 'pro-Israel' to balance the perceived 'pro-Palestinian' bias of the play. Finally, many weeks after the cancellation, in an overt effort at damage control, the theatre ran a series of panel discussions about political art and censorship to which the community was invited. Unfortunately, these discussions were organised by a PR firm, did not include voices that had been highly critical of the Workshop's decision to cancel the play, and limited audience involvement by making all audience members write questions and comments on note cards that were collected and given to moderators, allowing them to filter the responses before presenting them to the panel and public. No open debate or spontaneous questioning was allowed. Voices like my own – a playwright with a long relationship with the theatre – were not allowed to be heard within the rules the Workshop set up for these panels.

This episode, and the theatre's handling of it, did not inspire confidence. A politically progressive East Village off-Broadway theatre was behaving like a huge corporation, determined to protect its brand at any cost – even if that meant denying the truth. How could this happen? There was speculation that fear of the play offending individual and corporate donors – on which theatres in America rely – made mollifying those donors the Workshop's first priority, and that supporting artists necessarily came second to that. This Darwinian analysis was probably true, although there is no direct evidence that the theatre cancelled the production for fear of offending donors. We'll never know exactly what happened between the theatre deciding to produce the play and suddenly judging its political content too dangerous, because those involved with the decision have never clarified the many contradictory comments about how the decision was made.

The theatre's behaviour and subsequent rationalisations were disturbing. If a 'left-wing' theatre behaved this way with a famous play they had publicly committed to and that had already been produced to wide acclaim, what hope was there for unknown writers with untested political plays hoping to get a production at any major theatre in New York City, presumably including those who do not see themselves as having a politically progressive mission? Yet the more upsetting aspect of this event for me was the relative silence of the American theatre community.

Back in 1997, when Manhattan Theatre Club cancelled a planned production of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* because religious groups



*The US president (Matthew Marsh) gives his son (Eddie Redmayne) a lecture about free speech in Christopher Shinn's play Now or Later  
Credit: Keith Pattison*

objected to its portrayal of a gay Jesus, American theatre artists gathered together and publicly protested this decision – forcing Manhattan Theatre Club to reverse the cancellation and ultimately produce the play. I remember protesting with some of the most famous theatre artists in America in a big public event that was covered by local and national mainstream media. This time there were no such protests and very little mainstream media interest. Why?

I have an admittedly speculative answer to that vexing question. As one of the few playwrights to speak out initially about the cancellation of the play, in a comment on Garrett Eisler's Playgoer blog, I was in a unique position to observe my community's response. My comment got picked up by the *New York Times* in a story about the affair, and in the following days, I got a number of email messages from emerging and established playwrights thanking me for having the courage to speak out. Yet almost all of these playwrights themselves chose to remain silent about their feelings. Making their voices heard was as easy as a few clicks on a mouse and keyboard, and yet these writers, who were so effusive in their praise for me, chose not to.

Some of these writers felt that given their relationship with New York Theatre Workshop, it would not have been appropriate for them to publicly criticise the decision, but that instead they should communicate privately with the theatre about their disappointment. Out of respect for the theatre they kept their opinions out of the press, but they let their feelings be known privately. Going further, some of these artists also communicated with the theatre that they did not feel it was appropriate to collaborate with the Workshop in the near term following its decision. But for most writers, this was not the case: despite disagreeing with the theatre's decision, they kept quiet both publicly and privately. My take on this points to the dangers ahead for American artists – regardless of who is in the White House and how the recent financial crisis changes the structure of our society.

It has become evident in the last decades that America is fundamentally a conservative country. The great hope of a progressive presidency in the early 90s gave way to a centrist governing philosophy that demonised poor people, adopted Republican language on domestic policy, and enacted a hawkish foreign policy. Clinton's centrism laid the groundwork for the Bush presidency to move the country radically to the right. In the Bush era, the Democratic party maintained a vocabulary of opposition while essentially continuing its Clintonian centrism (as its support for the Iraq war made clear, to give just one example). Barack Obama, despite his progressive rhetoric, ran a centrist campaign for the Democratic nomination and seems unlikely

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to change the parameters of the debate or commit to major progressive policy initiatives as president.

Over these 16 years of rightward drift, the entertainment industry, while occasionally objecting to Bush's policies, saw profit as its primary goal and motive. To attract the largest domestic audience – citizens who had supported the centrism of the Democratic party and later the Republicans whom they put in control of the executive and legislative branches – mainstream storytelling tended to avoid an oppositional political perspective. In general, popular movies and television shows seemed to reflect and reinforce rather than question America's ideological foundations. During these years, the explosion of new technologies and global markets made Hollywood look for stories that had widespread appeal, since the bigger the potential audience, the bigger the potential profits. American movies and TV were eventually made to appeal not only to domestic but also international audiences – leading to a further dumbing down of storytelling, an elimination of idiosyncrasy, and an emphasis on the universal and primitive appeal of violence and sex in its most undisguised forms.

What does this all have to do with the American theatre? American playwrights became aware throughout the Clinton and Bush presidencies that there was not a hunger for truly oppositional political art. When the economy was doing well, audiences did not want stories that laid bare the violence at the heart of this prosperity, that questioned an economy built around exploitation of the world's poor and the environment, or on an ideology that promoted consumerism. After all, consumers purchase the cultural products that artists create. With the explosion of cable networks, the Internet and international markets, TV and film companies were hungry to snap up playwriting talent to create new programming for these technologies and markets. There had always been money in Hollywood, but now there was lots more. At the same time, in the theatre itself, corporate and individual funders who were providing more and more money to our non-profit theatres were also content with the country's direction. Playwrights who wanted to be rich were sucked up by Hollywood and given the directive to create stories that would generate massive profits; playwrights who wanted their plays produced by major non-profit theatres began writing plays that reflected the ideological beliefs of the funders who were keeping the theatres afloat, and the people who ran those theatres chose plays for production that would appeal to those funders. Privately, theatre artists maintained their beliefs, but publicly, to be viable in the creation of profit-making commodities, they remained silent. The Rachel

Corrie affair revealed that at this moment in America, the greatest threat of censorship is a self-censorship – albeit one inspired by fears artists have about what the marketplace and corporate and individual donors will tolerate.

Where does this leave us? Although there are individuals currently doing innovative and courageous work, I think that, broadly speaking, American playwrights have fallen victim to what has happened in the culture at large: the oppositional voice has largely disappeared and been absorbed by the dominant ideologies of our time – free market, apolitical, militaristic.

Sadly, it is hard to see how a country whose two major parties agree on so much, and whose wealth has become an expectation for its citizens, is going to transform itself into a more equitable and peaceful place, and one more tolerant of and interested in politically oppositional art. Global markets have changed Hollywood forever, and non-profit theatres will continue to need the support of the ruling class to fund their existence. Writers who wish to make a living wage from their writing will likely continue to self-censor in order to be produced at these theatres and to remain viable in Hollywood.

Are there any realistic grounds for hope? Could a change really come? Will an Obama presidency or the aftermath of the financial crisis help spur a change? In the aftermath of the Rachel Corrie affair, the fact that so many theatre artists would only privately communicate their support and agreement with me is both the tragedy, and the hope, of our current predicament as American theatre artists in the newly post-Bush era. □

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