

Sex and the safety message

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Wed, 2015-11-11 13:00

Newspaper columnists were having fun a couple of weeks back with the bizarre notion of Germaine Greer being “no platformed” by universities, excluded from debates for her unacceptable views on transgender politics. The feminist hero who wrote the *Female Eunuch* was suddenly beyond the pale. It resonates because of a debate I witnessed at a safety session recently. I thought I’d write about it here in the hope of provoking a debate.

My colleague, Emma Currie, was presenting on her drama piece *Gail’s Shoes* — about a woman dealing with the psychological fallout of her husband being left paraplegic by a workplace accident — when a female audience member suggested it was inappropriate for Emma as the “woman draped in only a sheet” to grab the audience’s attention as it could make women in the audience uncomfortable and render the workspace potentially unsafe.

Her reasoning was that the men would be wolf whistling or just thinking “she’s a bit of all right” even if they said nothing. Though the drama piece becomes serious very quickly, the damage is done as it were. (I was once dragged to a play, *Girls Night Out* at Stockport Theatre, and found myself one of only four men in the audience. It was unnerving — so I do understand the psychological mechanism this woman referred to, even if in my case it wasn’t preceded by centuries of discrimination.)

The counter argument was that Emma can’t do another of her scripts, *Dead Jed* for example, as that requires an overweight, 6’2” middle aged bloke. More than that, she probably wouldn’t have been invited to do *either* and wouldn’t be the successful head of the drama outfit Acting Up without the success of *Gail’s Shoes*. Indeed what makes the piece so powerful is that juxtaposition of surprise titillation (most safety audiences are ageing blokes of course) and the impact of the intense emotion that quickly develops over the next 12 minutes. (It was initially written for rig workers.)

The dilemma is: do we use what works for the vast majority of the audience even if it renders the workplace a little uncomfortable for some? (By putting the words “vast” and “a little” in there I ask a leading question and cast my own vote.) Or, is that a self-serving tabloid argument of “you have to give them what they want” which simply reinforces the status quo and hinders important progress? (More women in engineering and safety most definitely gets my vote too.)

I often use adult themes to wake up an audience after lunch myself: “who wants to confess to visiting a sex club for the first time?” It’s a jolting way of introducing the power of behavioural

norms in unfamiliar situations. It gets laughs, people engage and remember the definition.

As you can imagine, this was something the delegate to the recent safety seminar thought I shouldn't do either. (Obviously, I think I should.) That said, we have to adapt. I no longer swear at all at open events to avoid the possibility of a conference organiser having to field "not appropriate" complaints even though the vast majority laugh and if it were a film it would have a 12 rating. (The sound "uck" being the funniest in the English language so, though I never actually swore, a punchline to a story with that sound in it nearly always works!)



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