

Does the writer have a responsibility?

Jingan Young

Theatre is often described as a space in which ‘the writer is king’, where everything begins and ends with the source text. The American playwright, David Mamet, however, described going to a live performance as a visceral transformation played out live every night between the actors and the audience: ‘We are all here to undergo a communion’.

Visit any dimly lit, cheaply hired rehearsal room, kitchen table, library or café, and you will most certainly come across a group of artists beginning the journey of bringing a text to performance. Those discussions, held over the first few days of dissecting a text (once written), are the most exciting period of the journey. The writer is on hand to incorporate the creative team’s own experiences, offering them the opportunity to weave any nuances into the work. Conversations revolve mostly around how to reinforce a certain theme or motivation in the play. But sometimes the playwright just wants to please the room, particularly if inexperienced and in the early stages of their career. No one is there to remind them that it is important to maintain artistic integrity; mostly they are just happy to be there, happy to have their work be the catalyst for such vibrant conversations.

Unfortunately, there are cases, and certainly in my own career, where the scales are tipped in favour of the director’s vision or the performers’ egos.

Budgets and salaries are too often abysmally low, while the stakes are always very high. The modes and figures of power shift throughout the process, but if the writer is continually pressured to compromise their work, this can lead to the work suffering and its voice being mis-represented. The writer has a responsibility to many people – to collaborators, to audiences, and most importantly – and often forgotten – to themselves and their identity. Their voice, particularly if they are from a minority background, can become muddled or destroyed if the trust between them and their collaborators has been broken, or if they have been led to believe that certain changes are the best course of action for their story.

In the past, I have too often compromised. I am a generous writer and I enjoy working as a team. I love inclusivity. I love balance. But I am also a writer who can and has written until dawn if just one external voice has expressed a modicum of dissatisfaction with a line of dialogue, or with a climax that is argued to have come too soon.

So, perhaps this is a self-entitled, egotistic little plea. But I believe we have a responsibility to remind writers and artists to listen to and respect one another. We have also to remember that original voice which sparked the interest in us coming together, the voice which leads its believers into a new path of understanding and, in turn, offers something extraordinary to its listening audience. Without that voice, theatre is simply a cacophony of voices, a chaotic and ephemeral nothing.

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Jingan writes for stage and screen. Her feature film *No 2 Daughter*, a British East and South East Asian (BESEA)-led romcom, is in development with Greenacre films. She is part of the inaugural Sky Studios Comedy/Birmingham Rep scheme, mentored by Meera Syal, and recently completed the Channel 4 Screenwriting Scheme 2021. She is also writing for CBeebies.

For over a decade, she produced new writing from BESEA writers, under the title 'Foreign Goods', with her company Pokfulam Rd Productions. Jingan spearheaded the publication of *Foreign Goods* (Oberon Books, 2018), the first collection of plays by BESEA authors in the UK, with a foreword by David Henry Hwang.

Her book *Soho on Screen*, on London's Soho will be published in May 2022 by Berghahn Books.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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