

LAHP Collaborative Doctoral Award Scheme

Project description example

HEI	Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Collaborative Partner	Intimacy for Stage and Screen
Primary academic supervisor	Tom Six
Secondary academic supervisor	Diana Damian- Martin
Collaborative partner supervisor	Elizabeth Talbot
Nominated student	Rachel Vogler

Title: 'The system enabled it': Sexual Violence and Contemporary UK Theatre Institutions since 2017

Project description:

The most recent iteration of the #MeToo movement, which began in 2017, shone a harsh light on the theatre industry, illuminating its failure to take seriously allegations of sexual violence against industry figures including Kevin Spacey and Max Stafford-Clark. This project interrogates patterns of power abuse and sexual violence in the contemporary theatre, asking what they reveal about the gendering of cultural commodities, the politics of cultural production and broader experiences of creative labour in theatre institutions. The project will frame sexual violence and power abuse not as aberrant and exceptional, but rather functional and normative, asking how they are normalised and enabled by the structures and systems by which creative work is organised in the contemporary theatre. Currently, sexual violence in theatre institutions functions both to produce and reproduce gendered power, comprising an everyday context for theatre workers and sustaining inequity in the industry (Kelly, 1988). This project will generate new knowledge by critiquing the status quo through testimony, interviews and archival material that will transform understandings of the institutional landscape of the contemporary British theatre. It will draw together theoretical concepts from feminist theory, trauma studies and gender studies to develop a critique of theatre that tracks gender-based violence through its presence in the work- place, its function in cultural production and the cultural commodities it produces. With the CDA partner, Intimacy for Stage and Screen (ISS), the candidate will generate an analysis of cultural production that challenges the hegemonic masculinity sedimented in its institutions, spanning five prominent industry contexts: actor-training, creative and rehearsal practices, institutional structures, normative aesthetic representations of sexual violence on stage and prominent 'safe working practice' initiatives. These contexts cover a broad range of environments, allowing for a sectoral level of analysis, bringing to light connections between spaces that are more often considered in isolation. On this basis, the candidate will generate a set of theoretical insights into cultures of power abuse that make sexual violence not only permissible but normalised, affecting hundreds of industry workers each year. With each year since the #MeToo movement, 'institutional betrayal' (Freyd, 2013) has characterised the experience of many theatre industry workers whose complaints are perceived as disruptive to the institution. This project will make a significant and timely intervention to analyse the consequences of this framing for workers and students in theatre institutions.

Aim and objectives:

The aim of the research is to produce an analysis of gendered processes of cultural production in the contemporary theatre since 2017 by interrogating patterns of power abuse and sexual violence, assessing their role in sustaining the hegemonic masculinity responsible for the production and reproduction of gendered harms in the theatrical institution.

The objectives are as follows:

- To develop critical analyses of five key institutional contexts for sexual violence in the contemporary theatre: actor-training, creative and rehearsal practices, organisational structures, representations of sexual violence, and prominent 'safe working practice' initiatives;
- To analyse archival material including rehearsal diaries from prominent theatre directors and interviews with practitioners to generate accounts of sexual violence experienced within these contexts;
- To generate theoretical insights into the normalisation and enabling of sexual violence by utilising the concepts of institutional betrayal, institutional courage (Freyd, 2013) and complaint theory (Ahmed, 2021) as frameworks;
- To develop workshop plans and resources in collaboration with ISS to promote principles of safe-working practice that are trauma-informed and rooted in feminist theory.

Originality:

There is a lack of scholarship addressing the prevalence of sexual violence in theatre institutions. The groundswell of the #MeToo movement has generated limited research into this phenomenon, with reports from The Stage (2018) and BECTU (2020). However, these do not capture the extent to which gendered processes of theatre-making themselves sediment within institutional environments in which sexual violence thrives. This project will take these institutional contexts as a core point of departure, marking a development in much existing research that focusses mainly on two main theoretical strands: broad representations of sexual violence in theatre (Solga, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2018) and the role of theatre-making as a trauma- response mechanism (Thompson & Jacque, 2011; Christensen, 2013). This project will specifically examine the extent to which trauma and betrayal are endemic in the theatre, rather than emphasising primarily the art form's healing capacity and ability to reflect the trauma of sexual violence.

The studentship will also enhance a growing body of work on the prevalence of sexual violence in Higher Education (HE) (e.g. UN Women, 2018a, 2018b; Marsden, forthcoming; Federation of Drama Schools, 2018) that focuses on the role of dance and drama conservatoires as hybrid institutions, belonging both to the HE and professional performing arts landscapes.

Proposed methodology:

This project will utilise a set of explicitly trauma-informed, feminist methodologies as counterhegemonic strategies on power and sexual violence in the theatrical institution. Taking the politics of institutionality as one of its core explorative frameworks in this realm, it is chiefly concerned with Jenifer Freyd's concepts of 'institutional betrayal' and 'institutional courage' as theoretical grounding. These concepts provide a dual framing for discursive

analysis of the effects of institutional hostility to reports of sexual violence (betrayal), and the potentialities of feminist interventions (courage). Concurrently, this project will be rooted in Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'feminist ear', that hears complaint as an expression of grief and pain, and constitutes a reflexive tool through which the theatrical institution may consider incorporating a trauma-informed approaches to sexual violence in order to disrupt dominant perceptions of complaint-making as trouble-making in the institution. This project will bring Ahmed and Freyd into dialogue to identify a feminist framework for institutional sources of tolerance towards sexual violence, and to examine how current hostility to its reporting might be mitigated and associated harms reduced.

The student will analyse a range of existing reports including The Stage's report on sexual harassment in theatre (2018), Bectu's Dignity at Work report (2018) and Equity's 'Agenda For Change' (2019). In addition, the student will conduct interviews with workers over the project's five critical contexts. The interviewees will be identified via ISS's network, and the student's and supervisors' existing connections with students and theatre-makers. Approximately 40 interviews will be conducted, quota sampled by workers across the aforementioned contexts to ensure a representative sample. They will be semi-structured, in order to elicit the experiences of survivors in an open, safe and equitable environment, allowing flexibility for the interviewee and to ensure that their testimony is heard on their terms. The aim of the interviews is to gather data on patterns of power abuse sexual violence; its perceptions, manifestations and impacts. To this end, the interviews will be completely anonymised, audio-recorded and promptly transcribed and sent to the interviewee for approval. The original audio-recordings will then be destroyed and the transcribed files stored in encrypted folders. The proposed student is trained as a first responder to incidents of sexual violence, but requires further training in research ethics and sensitivities in this area. To bridge this gap, the student will attend a course on researching gender-based violence at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM).

Timescale:

Year 1 (October 2022–September 2023)

Researching gender-based violence training delivered by LSHTM;

Archival research completed;

Chapter 1 completed;

PhD transfer review materials completed and submitted according to Central's process. Year

2 (October 2023–September 2024)

Symposium on power abuse and sexual violence in theatre with students and theatre-makers at ISS;

Interviews undertaken;

Chapter 2 completed;

Chapter 3 completed;

Year 3 (October 2024–September 2025)

Collaborative events and workshops delivered in London with ISS, Central and Houselights;

Impact events with grassroots student and theatre-maker groups accessed through ISS' network;

Chapter 4 completed;

Introduction and conclusion completed, and final revisions and submission.

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Plans for dissemination and impact:

The project will be disseminated via the production of a thesis held in Central's research repository and ISS's archive, and through presentations at conferences, as well as a dedicated symposium on preventing sexual violence in theatre, held in collaboration with Houselights. The project will generate resources for entertainment unions, activist groups, student unions, and conservatoire staff teams to guide interventions into safe working practice to be circulated via Central and ISS's professional networks. This project has potential for impact on working practices and policy-making in the creative industries to ensure that safe working practices are treated as necessary prerequisites for inclusive and sustainable theatre institutions.