

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO CONTENT WARNINGS FOR THEATRE

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Why are content warnings important?

There is an idea across scripted media that content warnings somehow undermine the artistic process- this is counterproductive. We all hope that our scripts will be able to reach far and wide, and content warnings exist to help that, you never know who your script will end up in front of, and everyone has been through some bad experiences. For example, a person who has been (or may currently be) a victim of domestic abuse shouldn't read a piece about domestic abuse without warning.

Content warnings are about respecting those who take the time to read your work, and preparing them to be able to enjoy engaging with your work.

How to write content warnings:

Writing content warnings is much easier than you may believe- you don't need to go into exhaustive detail and you don't need to "spoil" the events of your story. In theatre it's very easy to categorise a play's level of engagement with any given subject matter, here are three useful terms:

-“Discussion of X”

-“Depiction of X”

-“Unseen Action of X”

“Discussion of” means that characters in the piece talk in some depth about the subject. Using alcohol addiction as an example: “Discussion of Alcohol Addiction” might mean that a character talks about what it is like to be an alcohol addict; however it could also be a discussion of being a child of an alcohol addict- or any other perspective. You don't need to specify the relationship between the characters and the subject.

“Depiction of” means that the subject is present in the events of the piece, seen by the audience on stage. Using racism as an example: “depiction of

racism” could mean that a character goes on a racist rant or it could mean that one character violently beats up another character motivated by racism. Here is where you want to be specific, but you don’t need to be exacting. You might separate the above examples into “Depiction of homophobic language” and “Depiction of homophobic violence”, depending on which your play contains. If you are including a warning for Depiction of a subject you don’t need to include a warning for Discussion of the same- your reader can infer the inclusion of the less severe level.

“Unseen Action” is a derivative of “Depiction”. It means that when the subject occurs- for example the homophobic beating- it happens “off-stage” between scenes. If you are giving a content warning for Depiction you don’t need to then give an Unseen Action warning for the same material.

Here is an example of the full content warning from a piece I wrote:

Content warning for Depiction of homophobic language and violence. Unseen action of sexual assault. Discussion of substance abuse and parental neglect.

It’s as simple as that. Remember- content warnings aren't about people being overly sensitive. We put content warnings there for those that need them, so that they can enjoy reading our work.