

OPENING UP T@E

ARE OUR THEATRE SOCS TAKING CARE OF OUR MENTAL WELLBEING?

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DISCUSSION NOTES

Lizzie opens up with her experience of directing a show. She had a series of chats with multiple members of the cast about issues surrounding their wellbeing. Whilst she felt she was able to talk to these cast members she did not feel supported by the committee or T@E. The role of director became synonymous with the role of wellbeing officer.

What are people's general experiences of wellbeing in T@E?

- There is a pressure to overcommit. It seems like a trend to do this. Is this because this way of experiencing T@E is marketed to us as incoming fresh? Have we picked this up from seeing the habits of students before us? It becomes a vicious cycle of freshers seeing how much older years do and thinking this the norm.
- Pressure comes from the feeling of responsibility taken on. Is the amount of stuff we do necessary? It becomes an "addiction".
- Multiple people highlighted a joking culture around stress. "All aboard the overcommitment train" and laughing it off.
- The struggle of lockdown had made a few people reflect about how they had been doing absolutely loads before now they have nothing to do. This led to thinking about post-show blues and how they can be completely overwhelming. Is the show you have been involved with a coping mechanism for uni experience?
- Staying on post-show blues, should wellbeing support continue after the show is over? We go straight into auditions week. There is a lot of pressure to move on to the next thing without a substantial break.

People get extremely upset if they do not get into the next show. We need to think about the struggles of wellbeing when people don't get into a show; the feeling of rejection but also the emptiness of not being part of something they once were.

- An experience of seeing people above you doing a lot of projects. This is clearly a recurring pattern. There is a pressure to “make a name for yourself” in the community, but it seems the only way this can be achieved is by doing loads.
- A suggested reason for overcommitting is that many people understand they are wanting to enter a competitive industry after Uni, so feel they have to do lots of different roles to be prepared. “I’m not doing enough towards my career”.
 - **IDEA: Have sessions/workshops on different roles within theatre, so students can't get experience without committing to taking on another whole show.**
- In our community competition and stress become a marker of success. Stress is the addiction but also shows you are successful but is also what cripples you. An extremely unhealthy cycle. The marker of success should be doing one thing to the best of your ability.
- Need to have an understanding that a role in a play does not define who you are.
- Drama society say they have been trying to push for more workshops on different roles within industry.
- When people take on so many things they then get an elitist name in the community. It seems these people are more likely to get chosen for roles. They are more seen and have more connections.
 - **Idea: More limitations on the number of shows you can have roles in.**
- Need to put more of an emphasis back on the notion that we are here to have fun. There is perhaps too much focus on professionalism.
- There is a concerning glamourisation of stress. You can never tell whether someone seriously needs help or not. Stress is talked about very

casually and this sets a weird barrier or marker of where our mental health state can acceptably be. It is dangerous to use language around bad mental health so casually.

- **Idea: A code system for saying you do really need help. We need people that are removed from the process that you can go to when struggling, not just the director or the producer. Could we have a 'Theatre at Exeter Wellbeing' Team.**
- Too much of the time it is the same people cast in shows. Doesn't mean they aren't brilliant. But it is also off putting/disheartening to feel you already know you aren't going to get cast or know you aren't friends with the right people to be cast. You shouldn't have to be hanging out with the right people to join projects. It makes people always conscious of their reputation.
 - **Idea: Have society do other activities that aren't just shows. It gives a chance to interact with people in the community casually but also without the pressure of being in their friendship circle. Workshops and collaboration with other societies would also open up the T@E bubble and increase diversity. It is important that societies don't just rely on past directors to take on these workshops or it reinforces elitism.**
- Concerns that there will be backlash to one show rule idea. Discussion has come up before around this with a lot of people unhappy about the limitations. On a high level people don't want to change. Unprecedented - have discussed rules for number of shows. There have been suggestions of having one show but most were against it. Committees worried about whether they will get good people for smaller shows.
 - **IDEA: Maybe we need a collective statement for one show policy.**
 - **IDEA: Create an overarching committee that looks over all theatre. A feeling that some people high up in guild don't want that to happen. Theatre societies are already a big burden on the guild. We can make or lose a lot of money - "we are quite stressful to them"..**
- There is a toxic environment of competition between societies and doing better than the previous show. It begs the question, are committees actually serving their members? Societies become too focused on shows

and not on members. Presenting well to audiences but what do members want? We have to remember that we are still student societies.

- Incoming wellbeing officers do have a chat going. They are talking about being present at auditions and the clash.
- Uproar at the start of any cultural change. Important to realise that once all the current students have gone these changes will just be the norm for incoming students.
- From a tech standpoint - If you don't let tech people do more than one show, not all shows will have tech. Currently exet tech are working on access to do tech. They have planned workshops. They already have workshops written that can be done from home.
- A point that if need wellbeing at the clash then there is clearly something wrong with the system.
- We need to change narrative around certain roles in the community and the value that is attributed to these roles. From this person's experience they felt compelled to do roles they liked less because they were ones that got you more seen and more into the T@E social bubble.
- More attention needed for welfare of people on committees
- We need to consider Band in musical theatre - would the one show rule work for getting enough musicians in? Also, Band gets no credit or publicity in T@E. If we change this we might get more interest from musicians. Band and tech aren't considered enough. Problematic that Shotgun gets less musicians auditioning than footlights - a really toxic issue. You can't train up musicians in the same way you can train up a tech person at uni. We need a separate talk on Band. There are musicians there but we need massive rebranding and more outreaching. Why are they not wanting to join?
 - **IDEA: Could we put band auditions before cast auditions?**
- Need better learning in place for tech - those who know it are burdened with shows.

- Need to reassess our understanding of the ‘Welfare’ role. It should be a midway point. The job is not to fix people’s problems but to signpost to where they can get help.
- If one show rule went ahead then another positive is that the clash would be much simpler.
- Overarching issue here seems to be inaction. Toxic trait of inaction - when people are brought issues it seems to just hit a wall. Complained about EDI training with the Guild and got shut down.
- Where does the Guild fit in with all or concerns? At the moment we feel like we are the guild. “Wellbeing services are available” is not enough. Guild already dealing with a lot of wellbeing problems. Experience of Guild harming show process. Ex tech equipment damage - contact guild and nothing is done. Where is the trust?
- Welfare officer is not as visible as a director and that's why members don't go to the welfare officer as much.
- We need to look at the roots of stress first. Instead of thinking about how we can support this stress we need to think about how we make the environment in the first place.
- Do we need bigger committees to lighten the load? Will this allow more problems to arise?
- Rehearsal scheduling was a big issue this year - hours were too long, schedules were clashing and so on, which put a lot of strain on performers and creative teams. I think the one-show rule will help to address this and I know there have already been some other discussions about this (limiting evening rehearsals to 6-9 etc).
 - **IDEA: Limiting evening rehearsals across T@E to the same time slot**
- It’s easy to slip into that “we have loads of time, we can afford to have a slow rehearsal” mindset near the beginning of the process, which has a knock-on effect later on where more rehearsals need to be scheduled. I think creative teams need to enter the process with some sense of urgency and with a detailed and realistic plan of how to efficiently use that time and maintain a consistent rehearsal process -

we've accepted at T@E that rehearsals become more intense as the show gets nearer but I don't think it needs to be that way.

- Cast/creative wellbeing should be prioritised above all else (including the show itself) when it comes to rehearsals, and not ignore individual needs. Cast members come into rehearsal while super sick, and are being made to stay and rehearse even if they're running off to the toilet every few minutes.
- Creative teams need to establish their rules/priorities before the process starts, as dealing with things like this on a case-by-case basis will cause cast wellbeing to suffer as rehearsals go on. And there definitely needs to be at least one person observing a rehearsal (such as the producer) being actively vigilant and ensuring these standards are kept to.
 - **IDEA: Committee/creatives - or probably more ideally, T@E as a whole - need to establish a more structured code of conduct to ensure these aren't all forgotten when things get stressful**
- The system for purchasing expensive items needs to be revisited as looking back it is ridiculous that members should be in personal debt to shows/societies - causing stress to them during periods like exams.
- Exeter compared to nearly every other uni actually puts on a small number of shows, Warwick or Bristol or Oxford have multiple shows going on every week, and they were really shocked when I said how few Exeter put on. I think the problem is that because there are so few shows put on, they become the most important thing, the be all and end all, which means there is so much pressure put upon them that the people involved can become so overwhelmed.
 - **IDEA: We should encourage those who want to start their own theatre company to be able to put on shows, and to include them in auditions week. The same people get cast over and over, and this would help combat it.**

PUSHING FOR CHANGE POINTS

ACTION PLAN

- Schedule discussion on one show a term rule (how does this apply to tech? - there are some grey areas that need to be addressed).
- Committee not being able to do shows.
- Overarching committee independent of societies/establishing relationships with Guild.
 - More concrete support in terms of wellbeing.
 - Bring this up with 'Society Council'. We need to understand the guild - general.
 - Creating a 'wing' that doesn't involve students.
 - Somewhere outside of committee to talk to.
- Frequent review of action plans / regular discussion events
- Mandatory welfare training for all committee members.
- Need understanding of the Guild - opening up discussion more discussions with the guild.
- Scrutinising people applying for committee of why they want the role in the first place (not just for your CV)
- Let's readdress what the wellbeing role is for.
- Write an open letter people can sign - regarding one show rule.
- Welfare drop in sessions? Would anyone go?
- What is drama society's role in this? - a great in-between as they don't put on shows.
- Look outside the immediate theatre committee for filling wellbeing roles? (why can't we recruit someone studying psychology for example?)
- Rethinking what the production supervisor does.
- Can we scale down? Do less shows.
- Rethinking the clash in terms of wellbeing (with one show rule - clash would be much simpler anyway).

ALSO - There is a request for an additional discussion looking at the different roles within theatre.