

# Abuse of power

Johanna Town on changing times



The final months of 2017 I hope will be remembered as one of the turning points – where people in power can no longer hide, twist or manipulate the truth for their own gains and protection. Women and all people on the receiving end of harassment and bullying have been given a voice and it is our job, every one of us, to make sure we listen, support and speak out. If we don't, the last few months – the #MeToo revelations and the work that has happened across our industry as a result – will have been for nothing and we will be back where we started.

I totally understand that this is not just a male/female issue; it is, I believe, more about power and abuse of that power, which often culminates in individuals being made to feel disempowered, whether that

is through sex abuse or other forms of abuse. I am speaking here from my own perspective.

I have spent my working life promoting the fact that theatre is a career that can be for life and that we are highly trained professionals who love lighting and should be respected for the many skills we bring to a production.

Unlike many other professions our industry is all about people and relationships. We don't have clear office or corporation guidelines to fit within. We spend long hours working in a close environment where we all work hard and play hard – and why not? If I had wanted a 9 to 5 job I would have chosen a different career.

Our industry, however, is small and there are many people, even in lighting, who are vying for the same jobs. This places us in a position of weakness; maybe, like me, you have been in a position where to speak out could have possibly jeopardised your career or could have lost you that valuable contact.

I have been lucky enough to have been able to say no to second offers from people I have not enjoyed working with, be that because of their bullying of others or me. But I have continued to work with people whom I have observed as flirtatious, over theatrical or just

jokers– but who may have also, I now believe, crossed a line. I have on the whole remained quiet about the bullies and predators as I have not wanted to appear a gossip. I also questioned if maybe it was just me reading things wrong: maybe I didn't form the right relationship with that particular person, and what gave me the authority to speak ill of them?

When I started my career in the early 1980s the antics in the theatre I worked in were common knowledge; books have been written about them. It was not, as far as I was aware, non-consensual, but who really knows what goes on behind closed doors? It was accepted behaviour – it was “theatre life”!

My first role as an assistant to a lighting designer was to make sure they were well stocked in cigarettes and beer during the tech sessions. Well, we most certainly wouldn't see that now in any theatre building. Good working practices have stopped all that, at long last. Now, as we're reaching the end of 2017, I hope we are going to stamp out harassment and bullying as something that is not accepted as “theatrical”. Change can happen. It can no longer be tolerated.

When I was head of lighting at the Royal Court my team worked with several directors and lighting designers who were hard work, rude and bullish. Then, I had somewhere to go to discuss this behaviour: first, my production manager and after the opening I would talk with the general manager and artistic director and make it known that

we would not tolerate such behaviour in the future. Interestingly, sometimes I was listened to and those people never returned to the Court and sometimes I was ignored, often depending on the talent of the person concerned. But talent should not be an excuse for such behaviour.

As a freelancer it is so much harder. Your next job might be at stake, and your own lighting skills might be put into question, especially when confronting a bully. Was it my fault? Did I not understand what they wanted for the show? Were they just trying to get the best out of me, by pushing me so much? All these thoughts go through your head. There are very few executive directors or production managers I would be happy to approach with a complaint. Why rock the boat? This is why it has continued unquestioned for so long and why I am pleased that the Royal Court has brought in guidelines. Companies are beginning to see what is actually happening in their buildings, and I hope this means they are going to be willing to listen.

Theatres are announcing that they have a code of practice or are adopting the Royal Court Code. I have already been sent a couple of companies' own policies along with my contracts in recent weeks. These codes have actually been in place for some time but companies have not up to this point felt it necessary to share these with freelancers – so this is a welcome change.

Several years ago, the ALD promoted Liteline: a link to the the ALD for members

who had complaints or issues. It has been a good link and I hope we have helped with issues from fees to working practices. Simply email [liteline@ald.org.uk](mailto:liteline@ald.org.uk) with your concern or question. A year ago it felt important to bring the more relevant issues we are all talking about today to the attention of our members through 9X% in *Focus*, where anonymous articles were submitted and curated by Katharine Williams. (To share your experience, email [katharine.williams@ald.org.uk](mailto:katharine.williams@ald.org.uk).) Our intention with 9X% is to let you know that you're not alone – and by sharing people can come together. The industry has many bad practices we need to iron out and by starting to talk about them in the open they won't remain hidden any longer.

At the time that most of these events happened, we didn't feel we had the skills or authority to act. I am not sure we yet have all the skills, but I do feel strongly that if any of our members come to us we will listen, support you and take time to locate the help you need.

The ALD will be adopting the Royal Court's Code of Behaviour for the forthcoming year. We will be working on making our own code of practice – a code the ALD would expect as good working practice from its members. We are also writing a working paper on the best way to support our members. We plan to examine the papers being produced by Equity, UK Theatre and others and make a full package of resources for our members to access. If you want to work

on a sub-committee to assist in preparing these documents please get in touch ([jo.town@ald.org.uk](mailto:jo.town@ald.org.uk)).

Writing this article has made me reflect on my own working behaviour. Perhaps you are now reflecting on your own. How often have you shouted at someone on your team? Was it the programmer or the stage manager? I know I have. I have also regretted my outbursts and I hope I have managed to apologise for many of them. What is it that makes us shout and possibly hurt someone else in order to do our job? I know for me, it's because I feel under pressure – a lot of pressure. Maybe the set build didn't go well and lighting is behind. Maybe the director, designer and I didn't give ourselves enough time to talk and now we are struggling.

I know that this doesn't make my behaviour acceptable. I also know that producers and theatre managements could take some responsibility for the pressure they put on staff in order to save themselves money by giving enough time in the schedule for things to go wrong and be corrected, and paying a decent wage so that more time can be allocated to a project.

I've seen many changes in lighting over the years. All have been for the better. We now want to stamp out bullying, sexual abuse and abuse of power in whatever form that takes. We want people to feel safe at work.

Now is the turning point we call for and we must not let it pass. 🍀

# Association of Lighting Designers statement on professional behaviour

The Association of Lighting Designers (ALD) supports the recent conversations that shine a light on abuse, harassment and bullying in our industry, that of the creation and support of live performance lighting.

We seek to be involved in changing this aspect of the industry for the better, and to support our members to the best of our ability.

If you have been affected and require support from us, please email [liteline@ald.org.uk](mailto:liteline@ald.org.uk) and we will support you as best we can.

If you want to be involved in creating the ALD's Code of Practice, please email [office@ald.org.uk](mailto:office@ald.org.uk).

We know that there are ALD members that have been on both sides of the bullying, harassment and abuse. We do not tolerate any abuse of power. Now is the turning point, and we will not let it pass.