# British theatre symposium sparks controversy with proposal to ban white male playwrights for a year



A recent gathering aimed at exploring innovative ideas in British theatre sparked a heated debate over a controversial proposal to temporarily ban the staging of plays by white male writers. This discussion took place at Soho Place in London's West End during The Stage's 'Big Ideas' symposium on Wednesday.

The proposal, put forth by American director Katie Gilchrist, was designed to challenge the prevailing norms within the theatre community, which has often been accused of gatekeeping. Gilchrist's suggestion was presented as a means to address issues of underrepresentation in an industry that has been scrutinised for its lack of diversity. Under the proposed ban, celebrated playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Henrik Ibsen, and Harold Pinter would be excluded from programming for a year.

Reactions to the proposal were mixed. Some attendees viewed it as a necessary step towards equity, while others expressed concerns about its implications. One anonymous delegate characterised the proposal as "idiotic, right-on nonsense," suggesting it would alienate a significant portion of the theatre community. This delegate further noted, "The Stage should not have platformed such a divisive idea, especially when around 50% of the room was white and male. What's more alarming is that not one of them spoke out against it for fear of being labelled a 'misogynist'. It's bonkers."

The symposium did not feature an open-floor debate; instead, questions were submitted via an app, with only the most popular inquiries being addressed. Following Gilchrist's proposal, a question raised the issue of the inclusion of white working-class men, disabled, neurodiverse, and trans men in the context of this ban. The response highlighted that "there were no trans writers of any kind being programmed on the West End," suggesting that the idea aimed to elevate diverse voices rather than diminish others.

On the other hand, another delegate applauded the proposal, stating, "The immediate 'whataboutery' in these comments is exactly why this is important. A brave, big idea, thank you Katie." However, despite these varied responses, the proposal was ultimately not adopted.

The most supported idea of the day was Rob Myles' suggestion to devolve the National Theatre, which received 40% of the vote. Myles questioned why devolution, a central policy for Labour elsewhere, could not be applied within the theatre sector.

Amidst these discussions, critiques were directed towards the broader ideological trends in British theatre, particularly after the National Theatre announced its upcoming season, which some described as ideologically restrictive. One delegate remarked, "They go on about tolerance, but only want one kind. The theatre world is agenda-driven and resent differing views."

In response to the outcry regarding the day's events, a spokesperson for The Stage stated, "The description of the day is inaccurate. No debate was restricted – on the contrary, delegates were encouraged throughout the day to share their thoughts and comments." They emphasised that the symposium allowed for what they termed a "lively debate" and noted that all presentations were received positively.

The controversy surrounding Gilchrist's proposal had been building prior to the event, as commentators had already begun questioning its implications. Gilchrist herself described her idea as "an invitation for us to critically examine whose voices dominate our stages and what it could mean to shift that balance… even for the historical equivalent of an exhale."

The proposal's timing coincided with recent tensions regarding theatre accessibility and representation, with former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak condemning performance events exclusively for black audiences as "wrong and divisive." This debate has underscored ongoing tensions within the sector regarding inclusivity and representation, as evidenced by the recent National Theatre's decision to include trigger warnings for its upcoming production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The warning, which alerts audiences to themes of death, grief, suicide, and coercive behaviour present in Shakespeare's work, has raised eyebrows among commentators who argue that such classic texts inherently come with mature subject matter. Historian and author Roy Schwartz articulated this sentiment, questioning the necessity of advance warnings for well-established narratives, suggesting that such practices might ultimately undermine cultural engagement.

As the theatre community continues to navigate these complex discussions, the recent symposium at Soho Place has spotlighted the ongoing debate about representation, censorship, and the future of British theatre.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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