# Director’s proposal to ban white male playwrights for a year sparks debate in West End



At Soho Place in London’s vibrant West End, a significant proposal sparked lively discourse among attendees at The Stage's 'Big Ideas' symposium on Wednesday. Director Katie Gilchrist suggested implementing a one-year ban on staging plays by white male writers. This proposal was aimed at challenging long-standing programming norms within an industry often accused of being exclusionary.

Gilchrist's idea seeks to address the perceived underrepresentation of diverse voices in British theatre, but it was met with a mixed response from those present. While some viewed the ban as a necessary step towards inclusivity, others perceived it as an exclusionary measure. The proposal would effectively exclude substantial figures from the Western literary canon, including renowned playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, and Harold Pinter.

The symposium lacked a traditional open-floor debate; instead, delegates were encouraged to submit questions via an app, with only the most popular inquiries being addressed. One attendee expressed concern over the controlling nature of this approach, stating it felt "Stalinesque" and overly restrictive. This sentiment was echoed in remarks about the potential implications for white working-class men and disabled or neurodiverse individuals within that demographic. When questioned about the inclusion of trans writers, it was clarified that none are currently being programmed in the West End, with one delegate asserting, "a rising tide raises all boats."

Participants' opinions varied widely. While one anonymous delegate deemed the proposal "idiotic, right-on nonsense," expressing concern over potential backlash faced by dissenting voices, another praised it as "a brave, big idea." The room ultimately did not endorse Gilchrist's suggestion, with the alternative proposal to devolve the National Theatre receiving the most votes—40%—in a broader discussion around industry structure. Actor and director Rob Myles championed this idea, advocating for policies reflecting devolution.

The symposium occurred in conjunction with the National Theatre's announcement of its new season, which also faced criticism for promoting an ideological agenda perceived to favour certain viewpoints. A delegate highlighted that while calls for tolerance are often made, they appear to favour a singular perspective.

In response to the controversy surrounding Gilchrist's proposal, a spokesperson for The Stage stated that the day's discussions were open and inclusive, clarifying that delegates were invited to share their thoughts freely. They emphasised that the conference was designed as a platform for lively debate on issues including censorship and freedom of expression.

Gilchrist’s proposal had already stirred debate in the lead-up to the symposium, as she described it as an invitation to critically evaluate whose voices dominate theatre and to consider the implications of shifting this balance “even for the historical equivalent of an exhale." Another finalist at the symposium, Catherine Russell, put forth a suggestion for live AI translation of theatre performances into over 60 languages, highlighting the variety of ideas presented.

Discussion surrounding theatre also intersected with larger societal debates. Former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had previously denounced initiatives like 'Black Out' performances—events reserved for Black audiences—calling such approaches "wrong and divisive".

Controversy also surrounded the National Theatre’s impending production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which will begin in September. The production, part of Indhu Rubasingham's inaugural season as artistic director, features a content warning for themes of grief, death, and coercive behaviour, drawing scrutiny for what some perceive as the need for such notices in established classics.

Roy Schwartz, a historian, articulated concerns regarding the appropriateness of trigger warnings for well-known works, arguing that such measures may undermine cultural engagement by overly protecting audiences from mature subject matter.

The varying reactions to these proposed changes reflect a broader conversation about inclusivity, representation, and ideological diversity within British theatre, indicating that these discussions will likely continue to evolve as the industry seeks to navigate the complexities of modern storytelling.

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

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/dec/13/indhu-rubasingham-is-the-perfect-choice-for-the-national-theatre> - This piece praises Rubasingham's leadership qualities and her ability to combine new writing with classic works, aligning with the article's mention of her involvement in the National Theatre's new season and the production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
3. <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/hamlet/> - The National Theatre's official page for the *Hamlet* production, which includes a content warning for themes of grief, death, and coercive behaviour, as mentioned in the article.
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