

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

ARTS ADVOCACY PROGRAM

17 October 2022

Dr. Joe Brown, Professor of Theatre Arts & Communication
Texas Wesleyan University
1201 Wesleyan Street
Fort Worth, TX 76105

Sent via email

Dear Dr. Brown,

As organizations dedicated to protecting the free exchange of ideas in our educational and artistic institutions, we are very concerned by the recent cancellation of Carlyle Brown's *Down in Mississippi* at Texas Wesleyan University. We urge its theater department to reschedule the production, providing the contextualization that is required for its specific student community through companion programs, workshops, or other educational materials.

History is often painful, but its ugliness is a reminder of things that must always be remembered. This is one of the messages of Mr. Brown's play, which tells the story of the brave students who traveled to Mississippi in 1964 to register Black citizens to vote. In order to accurately reflect that period of our history the script employs racial slurs to underscore the dehumanizing treatment of Black Americans.

It is troubling and deeply ironic that this play—depicting an important initiative of the civil rights movement, written by an important Black playwright—is facing cancellation for its use of a racial slur. To pull the entire production because some students find it offensive ignores the rights of other students and members of the community who want to see it. There is no reasonable manner—constitutionally or otherwise—to protect one from experiencing offense. To attempt this would result in the censorship of countless plays, novels, films, and artworks, yielding a sanitized presentation of history and a severely restrictive culture.

Colleges and universities are places where difficult issues should be examined and thoughtfully discussed. However, during a university-organized listening session, some of the grievances expressed had nothing to do with the play but reflected unhappiness with the progress of the university's DEI initiatives. While this may be a legitimate issue, it should have had no bearing on the question of producing the play. As a result, an opportunity was lost to fully engage on the message of the play and the danger of its suppression. There was no effort to provide context, whether by

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
AICA-USA
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International Association of Art Critics
United States (AICA-USA)
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The NewsGuild-CWA
PEN America
People for the American Way
PFLAG
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Poets & Writers
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Office of Communication
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Freedom Foundation
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

creating more occasions for Mr. Brown to speak with students, instituting a short companion lecture, or creating other educational opportunities.

For these reasons, we urge Texas Wesleyan University to reschedule *Down in Mississippi* at its earliest convenience. Southern bigots were unable to silence the civil rights movement. It would be a grave injustice to censor its message today.

We strongly recommend the theater department at Texas Wesleyan University to implement the best practices presented in the Dramatists Legal Defense Fund's [*Toolkit for Producing Stage Works on College Campuses in Turbulent Times*](#), a resource compiled over two years by a working group of educators, activists, non profit organizations and dramatists. We hope you find it useful. Please contact us with any questions.

Co-signed:

National Coalition Against Censorship
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
PEN America

CC: Frank G. Sablach, President, Texas Wesleyan University
Hon. Glenn Lewis, Chairman, Texas Wesleyan University Board of Trustees
–via post
Ralph Sevush, Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Jonathan Friedman, PEN America

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