

# 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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