

GEMINI AI:

A student theater group at Northwestern University canceled the final performances of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins* in March 2025 following a backlash over the script's inclusion of a racial slur. The controversy highlighted a conflict between artistic freedom and harm reduction within the student body.

Background on the production

- The Northwestern student theater board, Lovers & Madmen (L&M), staged the production in the Norris University Center.
- The cancellation was announced to attendees just before the final Saturday performance was set to begin.

The controversy and cancellation

- The slur: The cancellation was a response to objections over the use of the N-word by the character John Wilkes Booth in the song "The Ballad of Booth". While the script uses the slur to accurately portray Booth's racist beliefs, students argued that its use by a white actor was inexcusable and harmful to the Black community.
- Backlash on social media: The day before the cancellation, the production team's content warning on [Instagram](#) drew significant criticism. Critics argued that including the warning but not addressing the slur was a "racist action" that disregarded the trauma of Black students.

- Student reaction: A public discussion ensued on campus and social media. Student leaders and the university newspaper, [The Daily Northwestern](#), supported the backlash and the cancellation. Some called for a reduction in the theater group's funding.
- Decision to cancel: In response to the student pressure, the L&M board decided to cancel the final two shows and later issued an apology, stating a renewed commitment to prioritizing diverse perspectives.

Broader debate

The Northwestern cancellation sparked a wider debate about censorship, artistic integrity, and historical context versus harm in student theater.

- The argument against cancellation: Critics of the decision, including some free speech advocates, argued that canceling the show was an overreaction. They contended that the musical satirically and critically depicts America's history of violence and racism, and censoring it misses the artistic and educational point. They also noted that the historical accuracy of the language is essential for portraying the truth of racism.
- The argument for cancellation: Others maintained that the live use of the slur, regardless of context, was indefensible and created a harmful environment for Black students. For some, protecting marginalized communities from harm takes precedence over historical or artistic justifications.

This incident is part of a larger, ongoing conversation in theater and academia about how to handle historically

accurate but offensive content in a way that is sensitive to contemporary audiences.

Has this led to changes in how student theaters handle potentially offensive content?

Yes, the Assassins cancellation at Northwestern University has contributed to an ongoing reevaluation of how student theaters across the country handle potentially offensive content. While policies vary, the controversy highlighted a growing tension between artistic integrity and the priority of harm reduction, leading to notable changes in student and university theater practices.

New approaches to controversial scripts

- Revised protocols for content warnings: Following the Northwestern incident, many student theater boards are reconsidering their content warning policies. The goal is to move beyond simple, general disclaimers toward more specific, layered warnings that give audiences explicit details about potentially upsetting material, such as racial slurs.
- Emphasis on community engagement: Theater groups are increasingly focused on engaging in deeper dialogue with marginalized student groups and the wider community before and during production. For the Northwestern incident, a lack of "meaningful conversations with the Black community" was a key point of failure acknowledged by the student theater group Lovers & Madmen. This has pushed others to be more proactive.

- Expanded conflict resolution: Some student theater groups, like those at Tufts University, have implemented new student codes of conduct to create safer rehearsal environments. These include formalized conflict resolution paths and the creation of "cast representatives" who can raise concerns with directors on behalf of performers.
- Rethinking casting and directorial practices: The Northwestern situation, in which a white actor spoke a racial slur, highlighted the importance of who is cast in certain roles. Student theaters are now scrutinizing casting practices for productions involving race and are more carefully considering the director's responsibility for handling sensitive topics.
- Considering alternatives to censorship: Organizations like the [National Coalition Against Censorship \(NCAC\)](#) and the Dramatists Guild have encouraged universities to resist outright cancellations. They recommend alternative measures, such as providing additional context through discussion groups or educational materials, to help audiences engage with historically difficult material.

The ongoing debate and future directions

The Northwestern cancellation is part of a larger, national debate about censorship in student theater, with differing viewpoints on how to balance historical authenticity with audience sensitivity.

- Arguments for caution: Advocates for greater caution argue that the real-world harm of racial slurs

should take precedence, especially in a campus environment. Some also worry that canceling controversial shows might lead to self-censorship, with groups opting for "safer" topics to avoid controversy.

- Focus on educational context: Some suggest that the solution is not to censor but to provide robust educational context around sensitive content. This would enable students to explore challenging themes rather than be shielded from them.

- Repercussions for artists: Playwriting and theatrical organizations have weighed in to protest school-level censorship that overrides the intent of the author. This has fueled a conversation about balancing the rights of artists with community concerns.

Ultimately, the Northwestern Assassins case has pushed student theater groups to be more proactive, transparent, and communicative when addressing sensitive or offensive material. While there is no single solution, the incident has served as a catalyst for refining policies to better navigate the complexities of art, history, and social harm.

Give me examples of student theater groups changing their content warning policies

In the wake of controversies like the Assassins cancellation at Northwestern, student and university theater groups have shifted their content warning policies to be more explicit, transparent, and multi-layered. Instead of generic disclaimers, they now

often provide detailed information through multiple channels, allowing audience members to make informed decisions about attending a show.

Examples of recent changes

Layered warnings via QR codes

One of the most significant changes is the adoption of "layered" content warnings. This method avoids spoiling plot points for audience members who prefer not to have them, while still providing detailed information for those who want it.

- A general warning is posted on promotional materials, such as "This production contains mature themes and may not be suitable for all audiences".
- A QR code or link is provided for a separate website with a detailed list of warnings, accessible only to those who choose to click.
- The more detailed list can include specific topics like "references to suicide," "depictions of domestic violence," or "use of simulated firearms," along with potentially time-stamped details.

Comprehensive lists of topics

Many university theater groups now use comprehensive lists to define what constitutes potentially harmful or sensitive content. Examples include the following topics, which are often provided in policy documents or content warning guides:

- Violence: Sexual assault, domestic violence,

torture, war, and police brutality.

- Social and systemic injustice: Racism (including slurs), homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and antisemitism.
- Mental and physical health: Suicide, self-harm, eating disorders, substance abuse, and depiction of mental illness.
- Visual and auditory effects: Use of flashing lights, loud noises (like gunshots), and stage fog.

Accessible-but-not-unavoidable information

To balance the needs of different audiences, many groups are adopting practices that make information available without forcing it on everyone.

- Website integration: A specific, clickable section for content advisories on the production's webpage.
- Box office and program notes: A discreet notice is placed at the box office or in the program, directing audience members to where they can find more information.
- Ushers and staff training: Training for front-of-house staff to be prepared to provide information upon request.

Community-specific collaboration

Instead of relying on a pre-defined list, some theater groups are now building community engagement into their process.

- Consultation with affinity groups: Before presenting a play, production teams may consult with

campus groups representing the communities most affected by potentially sensitive themes in the show.

- Workshops and discussions: Some groups incorporate workshops or post-show discussions to provide additional context for challenging material, rather than just canceling or warning against it.

Example from Brown University

In its production of Cabaret, Brown University's Theatre Arts & Performance Studies (TAPS) department provided detailed, multi-point content disclosures. This included specific warnings about:

- Domestic and physical violence
- Nazi and Holocaust imagery
- A live band, flashing lights, and loud, sudden noises

These examples demonstrate a shift toward more explicit, accessible, and inclusive content warning practices in student theater, driven by a greater awareness of and responsiveness to community needs.

<https://dailynorthwestern.com/2025/03/03/lateststories/student-body-weighs-impact-to-black-community-controversy-over-racial-slur-as-lovers-madmen-cancels-final-assassins-shows/>

Student body weighs impact to Black community, controversy over racial slur as Lovers & Madmen cancels final 'Assassins' shows

[Madeline King/The Daily Northwestern](#)

The decision to cancel the final two shows of Assassins was announced right before the 2 p.m. show on Saturday, while audience members waited to be let in.

[Madeline King](#) and [Ashley Dong](#)

March 3, 2025

Content warning: This article discusses racism and the use of the N-word.

The Northwestern student body erupted into public discussion regarding the use of the N-word in Lovers & Madmen's production of "Assassins" and the slur's impact on Black communities this weekend. L&M, a student theatre board, canceled the show's final two performances and has since published an official apology, voicing the board's commitment to prioritizing diverse perspectives going forward.

The cancellation announcement was made by an L&M member to attendees waiting to enter the Norris University Center McCormick Auditorium just before the 2 p.m.

Saturday performance. Those anticipating the performance of the Tony-Award-winning Stephen Sondheim musical — based on America's presidential assassins — talked to cast and production team members before leaving Norris with unredeemed tickets.

Preceding the decision to forfeit the remaining shows, "Assassins" garnered a great deal of attention on social media after production team members uploaded a content warning to the "Assassins" Instagram account on Thursday. The post informed audience members of potentially unsettling content in the musical, including the

use of the N-word by white character John Wilkes Booth — portrayed by a white actor — in the second song, “The Ballad of Booth.”

The L&M board uploaded the same post separately to its Instagram account before opening night and included a link in the account’s bio to a one-page document of resources related to the usage of the N-word. The document additionally offered three bullet points to explain what contextual and character development elements the use of the N-word adds to “Assassins.”

The resources document referenced the following as being reasons for the N-word’s inclusion in the song: “breaks the audience’s building sympathy with Booth,” “places a significant contradiction in Booth’s world view and the lyrics” and “alleviates the tension building in the song” as audience members “are (subconsciously) waiting for this moment in the show despite it being shocking.”

The L&M board did not respond to The Daily’s requests for comment before the time of publication.

Some students took to social media to condemn the usage of the N-word in a production featuring a predominately non-Black cast and crew, calling upon the production to either remove the word from the song or cancel its final two shows.

The calls to action mostly came in the form of Instagram stories and comments under the content warning post on the “Assassins” account. Other discussions occurred on NU’s Fizz, a college-specific social media platform that allows students to post anonymous messages to others at their school.

L&M also came under fire for disabling the comments section under the content warning post on its Instagram page. Some commenters on the “Assassins” content warning post claimed owners of the show’s account had deleted certain comments calling out the show for its usage of a racial slur. As of the time of publication, comments on the “Assassins” Instagram account are turned on, but comments on two of the three most recent L&M posts are turned off.

SESP sophomore Noel Matthews was among the commenters under the “Assassins” account post.

Matthews said to The Daily that as a Black woman, it was “frustrating” to see the word used in this context and that advocating for its removal “should not only be Black people’s fight.”

“Putting on this play and using that word in that statement is a form of violence,” Matthews said. “Whether you are complicit with it in solely a theatre sense or a non-theatrical sense, using the N-word is violent. It’s linguistic violence, and that should not be condoned by anybody.”

Other students echoed this sentiment. Communication sophomore Elebetel Negusse, who is involved in NU’s theatre community, described the usage of the N-word as a “racist action” with “nothing else to defend it.”

Negusse added that the inclusion of the N-word was “inconsiderate” of NU’s Black community.

“I think from now on, it’s about time to start having conversations within both Northwestern, but especially within the NU theatre community, about anti-Blackness and what it has done to the Black students in the theatre

community, Black students in the artist community,” Negusse said.

Weinberg junior Aja Frazier, who served as the show’s dramaturg — a role that involved researching the show to provide important context and insights to the rehearsal room — also spoke out on social media Sunday.

“I am not a Black ‘artist’ who wanted to fit in with NU white theater and therefore disregarded my community,” Frazier said in a statement linked on her Instagram story. Rather, she joined the production because of “its relevance to today’s climate” and wanted to “make it a safe environment in a white-dominant theater space,” she said in the statement.

Though Frazier joined the team after the production process had initially begun, she was informed by other team members that conversations around the decision to include or exclude the N-word had started by the time the audition process began, she told The Daily. These conversations involved Frazier once she joined the production and continued until mere hours before the show opened, she said.

Frazier, who clarified that she spoke to The Daily as an individual and not a spokesperson for L&M or “Assassins,” said she personally engaged in conversations in the rehearsal room surrounding the usage of the N-word. As the dramaturg, she researched what Sondheim said regarding the use of the slur in the musical and the views of theatre artists both advocating for and against the usage of the N-word in theatre, she told The Daily.

Frazier led “difficult” but “productive” conversations with

those involved with “Assassins” that included discussions of comfortability, personal experiences and the history all concerning the N-word, she added.

However, even as part of the production team, Frazier told The Daily she was “in the gray” on what the final decision would be. She found out with the rest of the crowd on opening night, at the 6:30 p.m. show on Friday.

“I don’t know, again, what decisions factored into what when it came to the use of the word,” Frazier said. “Even when I was sitting down in the seat, I was still wondering if any last minute changes were gonna happen.”

Ultimately, the two Friday shows included the use of the N-word.

Around 3 p.m. on Sunday, L&M released an official statement to its Instagram account regarding the slur’s usage. The statement said L&M “failed to engage in meaningful conversations with the Black community” regarding the use of the N-word and will develop strategies for “preventing harm in the future.”

“We are profoundly sorry for the harm we caused,” the statement read. “Art should never come at the expense of the safety of Black and POC communities. Because of our actions and inactions, it did.”

The “Assassins” director, producer nor the actor portraying Booth responded to The Daily’s requests for comment. For Members Only and the Black Mentorship Program, two student groups providing support and community to Black students and working toward justice, posted a statement jointly to the two groups’ Instagram accounts Saturday.

“The choice to include such language reflects a failure to consider the lived experiences of Black students and perpetuates a culture where our concerns are dismissed in favor of artistic justification,” FMO and BMP said in the statement.

Weinberg sophomore and FMO’s Associated Student Government Senator Ay Taiwo said she wrote the statement with SESP junior and FMO co-Coordinator Riley Morris. Taiwo said that although she understands why the production may have wanted to include the word to demonstrate the character’s racist beliefs, the oppressive and hateful history of the word “trumps portraying that he’s racist.”

“There’s a lot of other ways that you can get that point across without using such a historically-tied word to the Black community,” Taiwo said.

Taiwo said she does not believe “Assassins” team members engaged in “any communication with any of the Black student groups” when deciding whether to use the N-word in the song and added that some student theatre artists encouraged “Assassins” team members earlier on in the process to find an alternative “more inclusive for everyone.”

At the time of publication, the L&M board and the “Assassins” director and producer had not responded to The Daily’s inquiry into whether members of the theatre community had asked “Assassins” to explore options not including the N-word.

Frazier told The Daily she thinks “the cast were put in a very difficult position” and feels that “the cast and the pit

and crew are least to blame for this situation.” She added that she believes the conversations regarding minority representation in theatre spurred by “Assassins” are important to have, but wishes the “Assassins” criticism was accompanied by a recognition of the conversations that had occurred about the use of the N-word.

“I just wish that (the criticism of the show) had been done in a way that wasn’t so disregarding of the humanity and the things that went on behind the scenes that aren’t visible to the public, because, of course, these things go through layers and layers of edits and censorship and adjustments,” Frazier said.

Frazier still emphasized the hurt caused to those in the Black community, as “the history behind the word is indescribable.”

The “Assassins” production team cited copyright concerns as one of the main reasons for keeping the N-word in the song, Frazier said, adding that non-student advisors to both the Northwestern Student Theatre Coalition and L&M pushed for the N-word to remain in the show for these reasons.

Music Theatre International owns the rights to “Assassins” and does not permit any changes to the material unless the production company obtains approval from the licensing agency.

“I would like to say that there were alternatives proposed, multiple which involved substitution, audio manipulation and things like that,” Frazier said. “However, when these alterations were proposed, they were explicitly shut down by the advisors, saying that there would be severe legal

implications.”

According to Frazier, MTI is known to watch NU’s shows to ensure productions maintain the integrity of their scripts.

Some weren’t convinced by this explanation.

Communication junior and ASG Senator Ryan Lien was a rights representative for StuCo, a role in which he said he managed applications, contracts and payments to secure performance rights for all StuCo shows that required licensing. Lien said he believes the “Assassins” team could have found a solution to avoid saying the N-word in the show.

“I find it unlikely that MTI would not allow for the removal of that word, seeing as I have worked on shows in the past in which we have changed harmful or outdated language, officially with approval from MTI,” Lien said.

The L&M board and the “Assassins” director and producer had not replied to The Daily’s inquiry into whether they requested approval from MTI to omit the N-word by the time of this article’s publication.

Lien also posted a statement in his official capacity as an ASG senator to Instagram on Saturday, urging the theatre board to issue an apology and announcing his intentions to encourage ASG and the Student Activities Finance Committee to decrease L&M’s funding for the 2025-2026 school year if it does not address the harm done.

Bienen and McCormick junior and ASG co-President James La Fayette Jr. posted on his Instagram story Saturday to condemn the usage of the N-word in “Assassins.”

La Fayette Jr. said that hatred is on the rise in the current

political climate. Those carrying out oppressive acts are “encouraged to continue their hatred towards minorities” because those in power are doing so as well. Therefore, it is important to raise one’s voice in the face of injustice, he said.

“Being silent about an issue like this is a form of being (complicit). If you choose not to care about it or not to say anything about it, that’s basically saying, ‘Yeah, this is okay. I’m not against this,’” La Fayette Jr. told The Daily. “I’m glad that a lot of students shared their opinions and that it spread around pretty quickly. Hopefully, that’s what pushed them to cancel it.”

Email: m.king@dailynorthwestern.com