

Laura is a relatively new friend. You are both actors and met while working on a production of a new play at a small theater company, Our Hands, in San Francisco (where you live) that centers queer people of color, and has a credible commitment to radical equity. Laura recently moved to the Bay from Denver and this was the first play she was cast in after participating in Theatre Bay Area's annual general auditions. She is a mixed-race (white and East Asian) cis woman in her late twenties with dyslexia. You and Laura shared a dressing room and spent a lot of time sitting around together during the tech process talking, leading to a fast friendship. Although the show closed a few months ago, you and Laura have continued to spend time together socially and you have introduced her to some of your friends in the theater community.

The Bay Area theater community is made up of theater companies of all sizes. One of its biggest regional theater companies is located in Oakland and casts primarily equity actors from out-of-town, although occasionally casts local and non-equity actors for larger ensemble-driven shows or as understudies. There are dozens of mid-size companies that cast both equity and non-equity local actors as well as a handful of small companies that don't have the resources to pay their actors but rely on passionate volunteers to work in and on their shows.

Recently, Laura announced that she was cast in a production of *Hamlet* at Oakland Repertory Theatre—the Bay Area's biggest regional theater. She is very excited to work on this show because it would tip her over into equity status, it is being produced by the largest company in Oakland, and it's hard to get cast as a local actor in their productions. Also, the director, Vincent Jones, is a well-respected director who is known for doing shows that promote EDI values and he consistently works at ORT. He often hires the same actors so being cast in one of his shows can lead to more consistent work at ORT.

Vincent Jones is a white, gay cis man who grew up in the Bay Area. After college, he started a small theater company for queer youth and developed new work around issues of sexuality and gender. He became well known in the local Oakland community, as well as the larger Bay Area theater community. Not only was he an innovative and charismatic director, but, as a gay white man, Vincent became a prominent leader in the queer community in Oakland and developed a reputation as an EDI activist. He was often tapped to speak at community forums and sat on a variety of committees throughout the Bay Area. After five years with his theater company, Vincent left to pursue a formal study of directing at a prominent drama school on the East Coast. Following his graduation, he directed a very successful Off-Broadway play, winning an Obie Award for best director, and becoming a national name in the American theater scene. Although it's been decades since his Obie win, Vincent continues to direct regionally and on- and off-Broadway. Despite his busy directing schedule, he always makes sure to direct at least one show back in the Bay Area each season, often at ORT.

Since rehearsals in Vincent's show began, you haven't seen Laura much, although you have reached out a few times asking if she wanted to get dinner or go for a hike. You chalked it up to the fact that she is busy with rehearsals. Although you haven't worked at ORT before, you've heard the environment can be intense, in particular with this director. Although well-respected for his level of

craft, actors who have worked with Vincent complain about his often intense behavior and volatile emotions. Vincent can get angry in rehearsals and blow up at actors and the stage manager-- he yells when people aren't working at his pace, he insults their acting choices, and he often belittles actors to their fellow castmates. He uses his gayness as an excuse to be disrespectful to women -- he barged into the women's dressing room on one production and started giving notes to a woman who was changing and undressed, saying "Don't worry, I'm not interested, honey." He gives the majority of his attention to the men in the rehearsal room, and has a reputation for developing "special relationships" with actors, asking them to meet with him privately to work on the script or go over blocking notes.

Vincent can also be very kind and sweet to actors, guiding them through difficult moments in the play and talking through particularly emotional scenes. Vincent likes to socialize with his cast, often taking them out for drinks at the bar down the street from ORT where he regales them with humorous stories of his many decades working in theater. Vincent and the Artistic Director of ORT, Beth Ann, went to graduate school together. Beth Ann (white, she/her, 55) is a single mother of two, who's dedicated her life to the theater (both of her college-aged daughters are actors, but they currently live and work on the East Coast). When her marriage fell apart a decade ago, Vincent was instrumental both emotionally and financially in Beth Ann getting back on her feet, and she can often be seen at the bar with Vincent and his casts. Local actors know that it's important to attend these evenings because developing a relationship with them can lead to future work.

After weeks of radio silence, Laura reaches out to you and you set up a time to meet up. Over coffee, Laura talks about her experiences in rehearsals for *Hamlet*. She says the first week of rehearsals was really fun. The cast is made up of primarily out-of-town actors and three local actors. She really likes the group, although she says that she feels like she is the greenest and most inexperienced of them. Most of them have acted in numerous Shakespeare productions and everyone in the cast has worked on shows with Vincent before. In the first week, Vincent took the cast out multiple times for drinks after rehearsals and everyone had a great time.

She says she was surprised then, when in the second week of rehearsals, Vincent seemed to start to single her out. He would give her these precise, perfectionist, relentless notes on her text, and she would receive the note but wouldn't be able to execute it right away -- due to her dyslexia she usually needs more time to process, something that hasn't been a problem with other directors and is not uncommon in theatre spaces in general. But when she communicated this to him, he yelled in frustration and implied that she couldn't have a career in the theater. The bullying got worse. One time they were working on a particularly emotional scene, and Vincent was pushing Laura to go deeper, get bigger with the emotion, to just *break down*, and they spent almost an hour on this one moment. He wouldn't let go, he just kept making her do it over and over again until Laura finally started crying out of frustration. He pushed her even more after that, telling her to do it again and that this was a breakthrough. She felt like there was no space for her to say no. Everyone behind the table seemed to be fine with what was going on as if it was normal.

Later that week, Vincent was working with the ensemble to stage a particularly physically-demanding scene. He asked her to run up and down the stairs to the second level of the set as part of her blocking. Knowing that her costume includes an extremely tight corset, a long voluminous skirt, and tall high heels, Laura expressed discomfort in being able to execute the blocking safely. Vincent rebuffed her remarks and told her just to do it, that “he knows what it’s like to run in heels and it’s possible.” The entire company laughed at Vincent’s joke about running in heels and Laura was deeply embarrassed. Determined not to cause a scene or be perceived as a “sensitive actor,” Laura dropped her protestations and started doing the blocking. Even in the rehearsal corset and heels that the costume department provided, Laura continued to feel uncomfortable with the blocking.

She really wants to do a good job in the show, so she started spending all of her free time working on her role, reviewing her notes from each rehearsal, and practicing her scenes.

In the third and final week of rehearsals, Laura says that Vincent’s anger was ruling the rehearsal room and everyone in it. He would yell at the stage management team, he banned the production assistant Kam, a 21-year old nonbinary mixed-race (white and Latinx) Cal graduate from the Central Valley in a year-long internship with ORT, from the rehearsal room one afternoon for being “too slow” during a set move. No one in the room knows how to respond in these moments. The stage manager Brenda is one of Vincent’s long-time collaborators and has been in the business for a long time -- her strategy for these moments is to grit her teeth and bear it. Ignore the comments and focus on running the show. She knows it’s a mood swing, she knows that Vincent trusts her, and that he’s just frustrated with the process. She is a white lesbian in her 40s from the Bay who lives with her wife in Vallejo. She worked in the queer youth theater with Vincent and always stage manages the shows he directs in the Bay; he made a toast at her wedding.

The veterans in the cast say that Vincent is a volatile artist but that he makes beautiful work, and he’s always been this way. One of the actors, Billy, a New Yorker who has family in the Bay, is particularly close with Vincent. Billy will bring Vincent lunch when he works during the breaks, they text regularly, there are inside jokes and nicknames between them, and they hang out together after rehearsal one-on-one sometimes. Vincent receives care from Billy, and softens when he offers it. Vincent also has a long-time friendship with Reena Joseph, the Artistic Director of Our Hands (Asian American Queer woman, mid-40’s), which contributes to his reputation as an advocate for EDI work.

While sitting backstage in tech during one of Vincent’s outbursts, one of the technicians on the show told Laura that he heard that around three years ago, a lighting designer, Lucille (white, she/her, 40s), lodged a complaint against Vincent with Upper West Side Productions (UWSP), a theater company located in New York City, citing allegations of harassment, intimidation, and creating a toxic work environment; and UWSP agreed to conduct an investigation. Outside attorneys interviewed a total of 18 people who worked directly on the production, and reviewed correspondence between Lucille and Vincent; however, the findings were never made public. Before a formal decision was reached, Lucille agreed to an undisclosed settlement from UWSP and signed a confidentiality agreement precluding her from discussing any details. Vincent directed seven shows in 11 years with UWSP prior to Lucille’s complaint. And while he has not been invited to direct with UWSP since this

incident, the company has not updated their website or marketing materials that still prominently feature Vincent and his accomplishments, nor did they ever release any position on the matter, only stating after-the-fact that the issue was resolved to the satisfaction of all parties. It should be noted, however, that UWSP did update their website in the last 18 months with a page displaying their new discrimination and harassment prevention policy.

After hearing this, Laura tried multiple times to bring up Vincent's behavior with the other two local actors in the group. She felt the most comfortable with them, although she didn't know them personally before this production. Both Jack (white, they/them, 33) and Lisa (white, she/her, 26) have worked with Vincent on previous shows at ORT so Laura hoped they might have some advice on how to navigate her situation. But when she brought it up with them one night after rehearsal they both advised her to put her head down and just do the work. "This is just what he's like," Jack said. "He acts this way with every new actor. He likes to break you down so that you can build yourself back up," said Lisa. Lisa recounted an experience she had with Vincent early in her career when he spent an entire rehearsal period berating her every move. "You just have to pay your dues with Vincent. If you can tough out his craziness and his ego you'll always be on his list of actors to cast."

Throughout the evening as Laura is recounting her experience, you notice that she looks exhausted and weary. She starts to tear up as she talks about how she wakes up not wanting to go into work every day, but that she knows she's been given a huge opportunity and she doesn't want to blow it. Though she is friendly with her castmates, Laura doesn't want to bring up these issues again. She asked another castmate, Krysta (she/her, 37, black woman, equity) if there's any leverage in dealing with these kinds of issues once you're a member of AEA (Actors Equity Association). Krysta told her that she could call the Bay Area rep, Ethan Schwartz, who has spoken on panels about being adamantly against sexual harassment and other abuses in the workplace, but AEA doesn't have an official policy yet, so she's not sure if they could actually do anything. "The risk, really, is about putting yourself on blast -- do you really want to go through all that, only to be labelled as a difficult actor?" Krysta asked.

Laura is at a loss. Laura considers you one of her closest friends in town—she doesn't have many people she considers close friends yet, still being relatively new—and is reaching out in the hopes that you might be able to help. She wants someone to be accountable for the emotional abuse and bullying that is happening in the rehearsal room. She doesn't want to get blacklisted for speaking out. She knows it's not okay, and that no one is speaking up. She feels that if she were to say something to the Artistic Director or to confront Vincent, she couldn't count on the support of her fellow castmates. The schedule is tight, the work is rigorous, and based on her conversations with the other actors, it's clear that no one wants to rock the boat.

She knows that you and a group of Bay Area theater makers are doing a year-long intensive in transformative justice work, and she's wondering if you might have any ideas as to how to find a way to speak out. You've gathered some friends who know about transformative justice to help you work through this.