

Bright Lights to introduce film content warnings

By Laurel Booth

The Bright Lights Film Series began posting content advisories on its website this fall to warn students about graphic and upsetting material in screenings.

Students responded to a survey last spring that asked them what kind of content they'd like to know about ahead of screenings.

The community feedback helped Bright Lights create the content advisory that allows people to check if upcoming films in the series contain distressing material.

Anna Feder, the Director of Programming at Emerson's VMA department and curator of the Bright Lights film series, said that sexual assault and rape was the mostly highly requested topic to be covered under the new content advisory.

"If anyone goes to see a documentary like 'The Hunting Ground', that's a film about sexual assault on campuses," Feder said in an interview. "Folks who go to that screening are relatively certain that that's going to be addressed. But at the same time, there's a film I'm showing where the female protagonist is in a car with somebody and it looks like it's going to be an assault scene. These are the kinds of things that I feel are good to let folks know about."

The content warning fall under six categories: Drug use and drug-related violence, violence, bigotry, sexual assault and rape, harm to an elderly person, child, or animal, and mental illness and suicide. Students can find which films scheduled to be included in the Bright Lights film series have been tagged with these warnings by clicking on the link at the bottom of the "Content Advisory" page.

Feder said she was motivated to make the change when she spoke with a student after an unexpected drug-related death appeared on screen.

"There was no indication this was going to be in the film at all, and then suddenly there it was and it was quite graphic," Feder said. "Someone came up to me, very casually, and just said, 'Hey, I lost someone recently to drug violence and this was content I would've wanted to know about.'"

Freshman Olivia Rettew experienced the issue firsthand after watching "IT Chapter Two" She said the opening scene showed homophobic views, something she wouldn't have known about had she not seen reviews online.



Anna Feder, the Director of Programming at Emerson's VMA department, speaks at the Bright Lights premiere. Montse Landeros / Beacon Correspondent

“Sometimes going to screenings of movies you’ve never seen before, you don’t know what you’re getting into. There have been a lot of movies recently that don’t have warnings and should have,” Rettew said.

As for whether more content warnings will be added in the future, Feder says it’s still a work in progress.

“This is all based on the survey and feedback from the audience, and I will continue to adapt it with feedback from the audience,” Feder said. “My sense is that any move in this direction, even if there’s an accidental omission here and there, is better than not having it at all.”

Feder said that, although the change will have little to no impact on most of the Bright Light series audience, the accessibility to this information could prove invaluable for some.

“It’s not about only serving the majority, it’s about trying to serve everybody,” Feder said. “I think for the folks who really need this information, they’re going to feel a lot more comfortable coming into the cinema.”

Sophomore Kat Carret said the inclusion of content warnings is a step in the right direction.

“There are lots of people who would appreciate that,” Carret said. “It’s a good thing that this information is readily available and not just a nasty surprise.”

Ultimately, Feder views the decision as additional dialogue being added to the constant discussion between Bright Lights and its viewers.

“The goal and value of this series is to create a space for film lovers to come together and create a community around cinema,” Feder said. “This is just another way to empower the audience so they feel like they’re coming into that space prepared, prepared for the content they’re going to engage with, prepared for the conversations that are going to happen, and to feel like this is a welcoming space.”