Members of Yale’s undergraduate theater community reacted with anger over the weekend to Dean of Student Affairs Betty Trachtenberg’s decision to bar performance groups — at least temporarily — from using life-like weapons in their productions.

The new rule is meant to protect audience members who may have connections to last week’s deadly gun massacre at Virginia Tech University or who may react adversely to violence on stage because of personal experiences, Trachtenberg said. But many students said the new restrictions represent inappropriate censorship of student artwork and that Trachtenberg should not have implemented them without soliciting student input beforehand.

The new restrictions were put in place to protect people in the Yale and New Haven communities who live or have friends who live in Virginia, or who have seen people die by gun violence, Trachtenberg said. She said the outcry from students upset with her decision has been exaggerated.

“I think people should start thinking about other people rather than trying to feel sorry for themselves and thinking that the administration is trying to thwart their creativity,” Trachtenberg said. “They’re not using their own intelligence. ... We have to think of the people who might be affected by seeing real-life weapons.”

The new restrictions do not ban all types of stage weapons, Trachtenberg said. She said she did not prevent an instructor in theater studies who talked to her on Friday from using a dulled knife to cut a cabbage head in a production, for example.

This weekend’s productions of “Red Noses” and “Orpheus in the Underworld” were affected by the rule change. “Red Noses” had to substitute wooden swords for more realistic-looking ones after learning of the rule from Trachtenberg on Thursday.

The University overstepped its bounds by prohibiting the ways in which students can express themselves on stage, said Dara Lind ’09, who has managed and produced several campus performances.

“Personally, I am very strongly anti-censorship as far as the arts are concerned,” she said. “I don’t understand what gives the college the right to try to circumscribe artistic expression like that.”

Lind is a staff columnist for the News.

Students should be left to decide for themselves what is appropriate to include in their productions and should be able to use theater to realistically portray a range of topics, including those relating to gun violence, Yale Drama Coalition Vice President Mike Leibenluft ’10 said. While he was in high school, Leibenluft said, he worked on a show about the Columbine High School shootings that documented witnesses’ reactions to the violence.

“I think the fact that it assumes that we first of all can’t deal with these issues in a dramatic setting and also we can’t take responsibility for the theater that is produced and the reaction it has from Yale students is pretty shocking,” he said. “I was incredibly surprised by it. I think it’s totally inappropriate.”

Leibenluft said Trachtenberg should have consulted with students before implementing the new regulation.

But Yale Dramatic Association President Emmett Zackheim ’08 said he is not concerned by the ban because he thinks the normal rules governing the use of weapons in theatrical productions will be
reinstated before long.

“I don’t think it’s a disaster for everyone involved in theater,” he said. “It essentially doesn’t concern me. I probably wouldn’t have done the same thing necessarily, but I’m not really concerned by it.”

Trachtenberg has not yet decided whether the new restrictions will be in place permanently and will review the decision as “things settle down,” she said. She said she consulted with representatives from the Theater Studies Program and did not make a “unilateral decision” about the rule.

Lind and several other students formed a "FEAR NO ART" Facebook group over the weekend to protest Trachtenberg’s decision and discussed ways to try to get the rule reversed. The groups have not yet decided on a definite plan, she said, but they may stage a rally on Beinecke Plaza or attempt to set up a meeting with Trachtenberg to discuss the rule.

"As far as collaboration is concerned, it will probably just be easiest to take public action,” Lind said. "The best way to prove that art gives much more to the student body than it takes away is to have public art and demonstrate to people what the benefit is of having unrestricted artistic expression.”

The continuation of the new restrictions could hamper the theater community’s willingness and ability to put on a wide variety of shows, YDC founder Eyad Houssami ’07 said. He said he would have “strong reservations” about agreeing to produce a show that requires stage weapons — such as the one he put on for his senior project, which required a shotgun — if the ban on realistic props remains in place.

“When you’re using realistic props, it doesn’t make sense to substitute them with children’s toys, because you are making a mockery of the play and of the character,” Houssami said. "I feel like by banning weapons from the stage at Yale, we are kind of silencing a potentially fruitful debate on violence and the nature of violence in America today.”

The University had rules in place before last week that limited the kinds of weapons students could use in productions, Trachtenberg said, but she does not know the exact provisions.