

In Small Town, 'Grease' Ignites a Culture War

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

FEB. 11, 2006

The New York Times

FULTON, Mo. - When Wendy DeVore, the drama teacher at Fulton High here, staged the musical "Grease," about high school students in the 1950's, she carefully changed the script to avoid causing offense in this small town.

She softened the language, substituting slang for profanity in places. Instead of smoking "weed," the teenagers duck out for a cigarette. She rated the production PG-13, advising parents it was not suitable for small children.

But a month after the performances in November, three letters arrived on the desk of Mark Enderle, Fulton's superintendent of schools. Although the letters did not say so, the three writers were members of a small group linked by e-mail, all members of the same congregation, Callaway Christian Church.

Each criticized the show, complaining that scenes of drinking, smoking and a couple kissing went too far, and glorified conduct that the community tries to discourage. One letter, from someone who had not seen the show but only heard about it, criticized "immoral behavior veiled behind the excuse of acting out a play."

Dr. Enderle watched a video of the play, ultimately agreeing that "Grease" was unsuitable for the high school, despite his having approved it beforehand, without looking at the script. Hoping to avoid similar complaints in the future, he decided to ban the scheduled spring play, "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller.

"That was me in my worst Joe McCarthy moment, to some," Dr. Enderle said.

He called "The Crucible" "a fine play," but said he dropped it to keep the school from being "mired in controversy" all spring.

To many, the term "culture war" evokes national battles over new frontiers in taste and decency, over violence in video games, or profanity in music or on television. But such battles are also fought in small corners of the country like Fulton, a conservative town of about 10,000, where it can take only a few objections about library books or high school plays to shift quietly the cultural borderlines of an entire community.

The complaints here, which were never debated in a public forum, have spread a sense of uncertainty about the shifting terrain as parents, teachers and students have struggled to understand what happened. Among teenagers who were once thrilled to have worked on the production, "Grease" became "the play they'd rather not talk about," said Teri Arms, their principal, who had also approved the play before it was presented.

"Grease" and "The Crucible" are hardly unfamiliar; they are standard fare on the high school drama circuit, the second-most-frequently-performed musical and drama on school stages, according to the Educational Theater Association, a nonprofit group. The most performed now are "Seussical" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

But challenges to longstanding literary or artistic works are not unusual, said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, deputy director of the American Library Association's office of intellectual freedom. Complaints generally are growing; in 2004, the last year for which figures are available, 547 books came under fire, an increase of nearly 20 percent over 2003, when 458 books were challenged.

"That a literary work is a classic does not protect it from being challenged, or even removed from a particular community," Ms. Caldwell-Stone said. Fulton, about 90 miles west of St. Louis, is best known as the home of Westminster College, where Winston Churchill gave his Iron Curtain speech in 1946. Presidents since Harry S. Truman have spoken in Fulton, lending the town a more cosmopolitan image.

Joseph Potter, an assistant professor of performing arts at William Woods University here, has staged dozens of shows for the community, including "Grease," and said he had never received a complaint. But politically and socially, Mr. Potter said, the town's core is conservative.

The three complaints about "Grease" reached Dr. Enderle within the same week.

Mark Miller, a 26-year-old graduate student, said he was moved to complain after getting an e-mail message about the show from Terra Guittar, a member of his church. Her description of the pajama party scene offended him, he wrote, adding that one character should have worn a more modest nightgown. Mr. Miller did not see the play.

"It makes sense that you're not going to offend anyone by being on the conservative side, especially when you're dealing with students, who don't have the same power as a principal or a theater director," he said.

A tape of the dress rehearsal showed that while most of the girls in the scene wore pajamas or a granny gown, Rizzo, the play's bad girl, wore just a pajama top. After the other girls fell asleep, Rizzo slipped her jeans on to sneak out for a date.

Ms. Guittar was so outraged by the drinking and kissing onstage that she walked out on the performance. She said she

was not trying to inhibit artistic creativity. "It was strictly a moral issue," she said. "They're under 18. They're not in Hollywood."

But other parents were happy with the play. Mimi Curtis, whose son John played the lead, said the principal and drama teacher went out of their way to respect parents' wishes, changing the script in response to her own objections to profanity.

Ms. Curtis, who ran a concession stand during the play, saw all four performances.

"I didn't view it as raunchy," she said, adding that children who watch television are "hearing worse."

Continue reading the main story

Dr. Enderle said he did not base his decision to cancel "The Crucible," which was first reported by The Fulton Sun, a daily, just on the three complaints and the video. He also asked 10 people he knew whether the play crossed a line. All but one, he recalled, said yes.

"To me, it's entirely a preventative maintenance issue," Dr. Enderle explained. "I can't do anything about what's already happened, but do I want to spend the spring saying, 'Yeah, we crossed the line again?'"

Nevertheless, the superintendent said he was "not 100 percent comfortable" with having canceled "The Crucible."

The absence of public debate meant that students heard of the cancellation as a fait accompli from their principal, Ms. Arms, and Ms. DeVore, the drama teacher. Others learned "The Crucible" was off limits through an internal school district newsletter. In it, Dr. Enderle said he dropped the play after seeing this summary on the Web: "17th century Salem woman

accuses an ex-lover's wife of witchery in an adaptation of the Arthur Miller play."

Mr. Miller wrote "The Crucible" in the 1950's, in response to the witch hunt of his own day, when Congress held hearings to purge Hollywood of suspected Communists, pressuring witnesses to expose others to prove their innocence. The affair is not acted out in the play, which focuses on how hysteria and fear devoured Salem, despite the lack of evidence.

Dr. Enderle said Fulton High's students had largely accepted his decision and moved on. They are now rehearsing "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as their spring drama.

But in interviews here, students, who had already begun practicing for auditions of "The Crucible," expressed frustration and resignation, along with an overriding sense that there was no use fighting City Hall.

"It's over," said Emily Swenson, 15, after auditioning for "A Midsummer Night's Dream." "We can't do anything about it. We just have to obey."

Both the students and Ms. DeVore seemed unsure of why "The Crucible," which students study in 11th grade, was unacceptable.

Jarryd Lapp, a junior who was a light technician on "Grease," said he was disappointed that "The Crucible" was canceled. But he had a theory. "The show itself is graphic," he said. "People get hung; there's death in it. It's not appropriate."

Ms. DeVore believes it was canceled because it portrays the Salem witch trials, "a time in history that makes Christians look bad."

"In a Bible Belt community," she added, "it makes people nervous."

The teacher and her students are now ruling out future productions they once considered for their entertainment value alone, like "Little Shop of Horrors," a musical that features a cannibalistic plant, which they had discussed doing next fall.

Torii Davis, a junior, said that in her psychology class earlier that day, most students predicted that "Little Shop of Horrors" would never pass the test.

"Audrey works in a flower shop," Ms. Davis said. "She has a boyfriend who beats her. That could be controversial."

Ms. DeVore went down a list of the most commonly performed musicals and dramas on high school stages, and ticked off the potentially offensive aspects. " 'Bye Bye Birdie' has smoking and drinking. 'Oklahoma,' there's a scene where she's almost raped. 'Diary of Anne Frank,' would you take a 6-year-old?" the drama teacher asked.

"How am I supposed to know what's appropriate when I don't have any written guidelines, and it seems that what was appropriate yesterday isn't appropriate today?" Ms. DeVore asked. The teacher said she had been warned that because of the controversy, the school board might not renew her contract for next year.

For the moment, Dr. Enderle acknowledged, the controversy has shrunk the boundaries of what is acceptable for the community. He added that "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was "not a totally vanilla play."

But asked if the high school might put on another Shakespeare classic about young people in love, "Romeo and Juliet," he hesitated.

"Given the historical context of the play," the superintendent said, "it would be difficult to say that's something we would not perform."