Firehouse Theater's 1968-69 Performances: Censorship on Campus

Peggy L. Roske
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, proske@csbsju.edu

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Censorship on Campus:

lights a few fires

http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6285t58 “Firehouse Theater Company” (text) and https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/105988079784/firehouse-theater-holiday-program-special (logo)
In the summer of 1963, a University of Minnesota graduate student, an artist, an actor, and an actor/director renovated an abandoned 1894 fire station in Minneapolis as the Firehouse Theater.

The company held its first performance just a few weeks before the Guthrie Theater held their opening show.

The group conceived the theater as a venue for avant-garde drama and as a vehicle for new playwrights in the area.

The Firehouse company moved to California in 1969 and closed not long after.

**But first they lit a few fires at St. Ben’s and St. John’s!**

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Mixed Blood Theater celebrates Black History Month at CSB

by Sarah Hornsager
Independent arts editor

The Mixed Blood Theater, in celebration of Black History Month, performed "Daughters of Africa" Wednesday, Feb. 10, in the Hibbingian Art Center Forum. The show presents a dynamic history of black American women and their stories of courage and strength.

"Daughters of Africa," written by award-winning playwright Syl Jones, featured Patricia Pendleton accompanied by pianist Roland Wilson and was directed by Warren C. Bowles.

The performance consists of a musical look into the history of black American women, rather than the history of black American men. Throughout history, black women have faced unique situations because of their cultural roles, and "Daughters of Africa," recognizes and commemorates black women who have earned their place in America's history.

"Actually women's history shouldn't be necessary," said Jill Schlick, a senior history major at CSB.

However, Schlick also goes on to say that much of what we've recorded historically is political, a realm from which women were, until recently, excluded. And women have often made historical advancement at different times and in different ways than men, so women's history must be recognized and studied.

Celebrated in the program are dynamic and influential women like Harriet Tubman, the conductor of the Underground Railroad, who led hundreds of blacks to freedom; Elizabeth Freeman, whose legal struggle helped abolish slavery in Massachusetts; and Madame C.J. Walker, America's first black millionaire. The songs included in the performance are melodies made famous by Bessie Smith, Lena Horne, Janet Jackson as well as a list of others.

"Daughters of Africa," is only one of six touring productions offered by The Mixed Blood Theater, who bases itself in a century-old firehouse in Minneapolis. The others include biographical accounts on Martin Luther King, Paul Robeson, and Judie Robinson; "According to Coyote," a collection of Native American legends; "Eastern Parade: The Asian American Journey and, coming in the fall of 1993, "Minnesota," about growing up Chinico in Minnesota.

(Not to be confused with the Mixed Blood Theater, which has also performed at CSB, and which also is located in a converted Minneapolis firehouse.)
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(Not to be confused with the Mixed Blood Theater, which has also performed at CSB, and which also is located in a converted Minneapolis firehouse.)
The Mixed Blood Theatre Company is a professional multiracial theatre company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was founded in 1976 by artistic director Jack Reuler.

- Wikipedia
The BAC opened in fall 1964.
"Trinity" is a treatment of sex," stated Sister Colman, chairman of the Theatre Department. "It is, however, more than a merely sensual or sensational treatment, designed to titillate the adolescent theatre-goer in the manner of a "Playboy" photo. Instead, it probes deeply into an issue that really matters in our time, by asking, "Is sex the answer to our hunger for communion?"

"In asking such a question, so-called "sexy" scenes may be artistically necessary for the playwright to work through to a truthful answer. Hopefully, our audience will be mature enough to follow the play's probing to the point of insight, rather than becoming shocked on the journey toward the vision."
Page 1 of the next issue of *The Torch* has a feature on the reopening of the local hangout for college students...

...and two of its eight pages are about the Firehouse production, including Letters to the Editor...

October 29, 1968

To this I answer now: Can anyone who saw this "performance" come away from the theatre without disturbing doubts as to the prurient interests entertained?

October 29, 1968

1968 10 29 The Torch p.2
Faculty and students have discussed, argued and lectured. Two hours at the Forum Sunday night, October 13, brought the freshman class into an acme of responsive vehemence, bitter and impetuous response which stabbed the convictions of many people (I won't say individuals) in the freshman class.

Sunday night I missed the point. When I walked out, I thought I'd never go to see a Firehouse production again.

Monday's Basic Studies class, however, reached an honesty, an openness (or a closing for some)
The product of a liberal arts education: an open-minded student

October 29, 1968

Never has there been such a catharsis as our freshman class went through Monday morning. We exposed rudeness, prejudice, misunderstanding, and were quick to denounce. We didn’t make an effort, either, to ask what the intent of the plays actually was. We had been blasted as no lecture or movie or book could have done by a new kind of theater.

I can say now that I would try not to close myself to apprehending a truth of life by passing up another Firehouse Theater performance.

1968 10 29 The Torch p.2
What is theater and where is it going are two of the most frequently asked questions. Since many of you have posed these questions of late, I will attempt a few possible answers.

To hazard a definite theater is risky; it may even be said that it is conditioned by men and for their fellow men (e.g., the theatre) is life. The theater is necessarily a place where we go to derive pleasure or to see other people. A theater can be a living thing in itself, a community united or separated by some common interest in a dynamic relationship with the world around it. The theater offers us a place to go to be part of a living thing and to experience it in a way that is different from our ordinary experience.

The theater then is striving to achieve a necessity within one's life. The theater of protest, the theater of the absurd, the space theater, and the environmental theater, all have developed from such a praiseworthy striving. By Jan Bentley

Can't be P. 3

life behind an illusion of parity.

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http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/115/rec/3
Play Review

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To My Seat

By Meda Ellen Sexton

This fall Mike Steele, the theatre critic for the Minneapolis Tribune, did a study of avant garde theatre. The question of smut came up. "smut for smut sake may not be art but it has been good social criticism. These works came to mind more than once when as I saw the Fourhouse Theatre Company in the production of Faust last Sunday night. Nobody goes to the Fourhouse with the sole intention of viewing a play. If that is what you have in mind it is discarded from the minute you walk in the door. Each member of the audience is a participant—the amount of participation depends on whether you came to see Faust or be Faust.

Each member of the audience is led into the small theatre individually. Some bearded husks met me at the door, took me into the theatre, tossed me on his back and carried me ziggy-back across the stage, back again and up and down a number of steps, set me down on the bare floor in a place I discovered was to be my seat for the evening. I took off my coat and asked if I could see Faust or be Faust. I told him I came to see Faust and he went on about his business as normal—whatever that may be.

I heard footsteps and a few mounds and groans but could not see a thing until the huts went on. They really should not have gone to all the trouble to flip the switch. Edward Albee's definition of the avant garde seems to fit perfectly here. "There is a concretizing breakdown of language and communication and deliberate work of baffling the audience." It really wouldn't have made much difference if the entire show was performed in the dark except for the instrumental music performed by the --why was there the affair of the mouse? I remember moments when the audience actually got so worked up that they couldn't think of anything to say. The smut was flowing—rushing from every corner of the room. The language could talk about the man who sells his soul to the devil. They tried too hard, they pushed us too hard and unfortunately suffocated themselves and the audience.

The actors went around to each of us individually to tell us it was over—a good thing I really. I wouldn't have known when to have gone home. They invited us to stay and see it over again from the beginning and being a good sport about the whole thing I decided to stay. At this point the see Fausters were separat

March 27, 1969

1969 03 27 p.4 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/183/rec/4
The earliest document about what happened later at SJU is an April 7 (Easter Monday) 1969 treatise written by Bill Van Cleve as The Record documents later:

The salient aspects of the recent Firehouse Theater controversy are fairly common knowledge, namely, that an avant-garde theater group known as the Firehouse Theatre produced a play on campus which contained scenes of male and female nudity. The controversy which surrounded this production has caused serious repercussions both within and without the immediate St. John’s community.

Bill Van Cleve was the SJU’s Director of Student Affairs from 1967-69 and Director of Counseling & Institutional Research from 1969-70 (and then the Registrar).

April 7 Monday

1969 04 07 Memo to Father Colman and Members of the Administrative Council from William Van Cleve, 1969
The Record April 18, 1969, p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33845/rec/4
Firehouse’s two performances, Rags and Faust, were to be sponsored by the Owl’s Head Coffee House and subsidized by the Undergraduate Student Government.

The appropriate channels had been followed:

- Fr. Eugene in Academic Affairs was contacted to check for scheduling conflicts.
- A verbal agreement was made for the use of the gym with Mr. George Durenberger.
- Housing for the company and publicity were arranged.

April 9 Wednesday

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
On Tuesday, April 8:

Word reached...interested students and faculty that Fr. Colman wished to meet with everyone responsible for the tentative appearances of the Firehouse.

The word was out that pressure was being applied to cancel the Firehouse.

That afternoon the Administrative Council met from 1 PM to 3 PM, and several members, along with Fr. Colman, met with the concerned and responsible students at 4 PM.

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1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
Fr. Colman felt proper channels were not used.

Trustees and “concerned friends of St. John’s…were upset (to put it mildly)…”

The appearance:
- could endanger the capital funds drive
- would conflict with prevailing views of the local community
- would damage St. John’s image
- would endanger future appropriations by the legislature to the MN Fine Arts Commission
- might precipitate resignations by trustees and faculty

April 9 Wednesday
The students offered positive proposals:

- statements would be released to the media disassociating SJU and clarifying who was responsible
- the Theater department and the acting company would hold lectures and discussions
- the audience would be restricted to SJU, CSB, and SCSU members
- Firehouse would be asked to perform one of the plays without nudity

April 9 Wednesday
The negotiations dragged on for three hours...

It became apparent that the only compromise acceptable to Fr. Colman (and the board, alumni and friends) was cancellation.

The students were placed in the position of accepting "total" responsibility for all consequences.

The students accepted cancellation of the performances in exchange for a guarantee that Firehouse would be back in the fall as part of a Theatre perspective week, and that the $500 penalty for breaking the contract would be taken care of by Fr. Colman.
Thursday, April 10

• Students were to meet with administrators to continue discussions.

• Students arranged for the play to be performed at Avon’s Lakeview Ballroom Thursday evening.

• The ballroom’s proprietor cancelled it when he “found out it wasn’t just another St. John’s and St. Ben’s activity.”

• One student said the earlier performance at St. Ben’s touched off some complaints “by people in the community who didn’t see the play.” That helped “create outside agitation against Firehouse.”
The National Catholic News Service weighs in a week later.

The play “Faust” DID go on -

“in order to prevent the possibility of any violence on our campus.”

April 17(?)

1969 04 St. Cloud Visitor Theatre Group Performs Nude Scenes
STATEMENT BY ABBOT BALDWIN DWORSCHAK, O.S.B.

4/10/69 P.M.

The Firehouse Theatre group is appearing on the Saint John's campus this evening without any official endorsement of Saint John's Abbey, the University faculty, or students of this institution.

It is our view that this group of players is trespassing on our campus. They are appearing here despite the fact that no contractual agreement exists between them and any responsible individual on this campus.

We have regretfully permitted the players to perform this evening in order to prevent the possibility of violence on our campus. Emotions have run extremely high among our students. Many have urged that the performance be permitted because of what they conscientiously believe to be a matter of academic freedom.

Many others share the view of the Abbey and University administration that the performance violates what we in this Christian community consider as acceptable and decent standards of conduct and deportment.
We make no judgment as to the artistic or aesthetic value of this performance. We are concerned here exclusively with maintaining and nourishing the Christian ideals and principles for which this institution has stood for well over a century.

I wish to state categorically that we do not approve of this performance. We have permitted it to take place only because we wish above all to prevent physical violence on this campus.

Like any human organization, some of our procedures are faulty. Our lines of communication with the students break down in rare instances. We intend to correct this situation promptly and to clarify in a most explicit way for our students and their parents that Saint John's, -- as a liberal arts college in a Christian context -- will remain precisely that. We do not intend to compromise our principles nor to permit on this campus theatrical performances or other activities which are offensive to the large majority of this community.
The Record wasn’t a weekly then, and wasn’t published between March 21 and April 18 (because of Easter/spring break) – but it documented things after they happened.
A discussion was then arranged for Thursday at one p.m. in the Great Hall at which time the entire student body was to express their opinion. Fr. Abbot, Fr. Colman and members of the Administrative Council were all present to talk to the students.
A discussion was then arranged for Thursday at one p.m. in the Great Hall at which time the entire student body was to express their opinion. Fr. Abbot, Fr. Colman and members of the Administrative Council were all present to talk to the students. The end result of this meeting was that the students demanded a vote be taken to decide whether the play would be allowed.
The Record April 18, 1969, p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33845/rec/4
and p. 3 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33847/rec/4
1969 04 11 St. John's Permits Nude Play to Prevent Physical Violence, Mpls Trib

Photo: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 150

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48989/rec/51
1969 04 Pioneer Press “No Discipline Expected...”
Who’s Kidding Whom? Censorship Not The Issue

The recent production of the Firehouse Theater on this campus brought to light several issues which are vital to the future of St. John’s University. One of these was censorship at SJU. The fact that Firehouse all play indicates that censorship is not a real danger. More overt forms of censorship, in the form of various kinds of “pressure,” were and still are the basic part of the censorship issue.

At the beginning of the debate over Firehouse, censorship might have been crucial. But at some point the situation deteriorated, by circumstances or design, into one in which power became paramount. For good or ill, all the ugly ramifications of unrestrained power came to center stage and became the focus for debate and action. Trample power, Administration power, Monk power, Alumni power and Executive power all came under attack by many of the students. The Trample in case you missed the point. The students took it upon themselves to change an institution. They took this responsibility upon themselves without adequately becoming informed, without adequately weighing the pros and cons, without taking into account the dooms, fears and feelings of all the people who are a part of this institution known as St. John’s Abbey and University.

The tragedy of all this lies in the fact that this change, which has at least the possibility of being injurious to St. John’s, was brought about in an atmosphere of distrust, recoils, and emotionalism. Instead of taking the time to work out a solution which all could live with, if not wholeheartedly accept, somebody pushed St. John’s into diving into the lake without checking for rocks. Whether the rocks are really there or not does not make the act of jumping any more reasonable.

—Ford
Cracks in the Sidewalk
by Spikes

It's been awhile since I last took the time to jot down a few of my perverted thoughts for this column. I realize that too much has been said about the Firehouse Theatre episode and I know I should let it die, but I must make a few observations. My apologies for my tardiness.

As far as the whole mess is concerned, I think all of us have witnessed a living example of how pious cats have a way of turning into tigers with the aid of the right people. My interpretation of the affair:

First of all, Firehouse asks may we please come and show our bobs?
Fearless Leader says yes, please do.
Then the boys with the coin threaten to pick up their balls and bats and go home if Sunny St. Jack's allows a skin show to proceed as planned cuz they never got to see stuff like that—they had to be content with their dirty jokes and pre-Playboy magazines.
Fearless Leader says no.
Then the Liberated Kids get together and decide that if gunkies from other colleges do it then they better do it, too, cuz what would SDS say about SJU if there wouldn't be any demonstrations and other groovy stuff like that here—except that the SJU Liberated Kids don't know exactly how to react. They could follow the example of their peers from Columbia, Berkeley, Harvard, Cornell, etc., and turn the campus into a war zone. Instead, they call for a general meeting of the community. Non-violent. I repeat, non-violent.

The press and other big mouths love it—a chance for a really big story right here in central Minnesota. "Now we can catch up with the big guys." Debate from both sides at the general meeting.

Trusted Trustee says love you.
Fearless Leader says no, then maybe, then what the hell! Let's vote on it. The majority says yes.

Fearless Leader says nothing and blushes.

Spiritual Leader gets into the act and says no, but in order to prevent violence the show must go on. Hurky Dory. And Pontius Pilate, in order to prevent violence, washed his hands and delivered Jesus into the hands of the crowd to be crucified. Nice reasoning.
The show goes on, almost incidentally.

Trusted Trustee and friends grab their bags of gold and retire to their respective vaults. The school is penniless.

The Record editorial stuff and other Goldwaterites point accusing fingers at the Liberated Kids.

Fearless Leader, the individual who could have settled the entire matter early in the campaign with a simple, meaningful yes or no and handled the alumni and students with his usual aplomb, sits in his office and blushes.
And the beat goes on. * * *
The Theology Department weights in:

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY
SAINT JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
COLLEGEVILLE MINNESOTA 55321

May 9, 1969

MEMO TO:
The Chancellor of Saint John's University,
Abbot Balduin Hormosh, O.S.S.
The members of the Board of Trustees,
Saint John's University
The College of Saint Benedict
The President of Saint John's University,
Father Thomas J. Barry, O.S.B.
The President of The College of Saint Benedict,
Sr. Cecily J. Idoroko
The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of Saint John's University,
Father Hilary J. Hinesch, O.S.B.
The Dean of The College of Saint Benedict,
Sister FInvest Escher, O.S.B.
The Dean of the School of Divinity of Saint John's University,
Father Victor B. Buskey, O.S.B.
The Dean of The Graduate School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Father Alfred M. Tegela, O.S.B.
Mother Monica Gobert, O.S.B.

CONCERNING:
Moral issues raised by the Firehouse Theatre's play presented at Saint John's University.

FROM:
The Chairman of the Department of Theology of Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict, Father Michael Paulus Blecker, O.S.B.

May 9
The Theology Department weighs in:

**CONCERNING:**

Moral issues raised by the Firehouse Theatre’s play presented at Saint John's University.

**FROM:**

The Chairman of the Department of Theology of Saint John’s University and The College of Saint Benedict, Father Michael Paulin Blocker, O.F.M.

The members of the Theology Department of Saint John’s University and The College of Saint Benedict in the business meeting of May 7, 1969, voted 11 to 5 that the following statement be distributed to the administrations of Saint John’s University and The College of Saint Benedict. In accordance, therefore, with the directive of the faculty of the Department of Theology the following statement is proposed for your consideration:

**INTRODUCTION**

Concrete moral decisions are seldom simple. In order to help in the evaluation of recent events an expert theology faculty proposes the following principles.

**PRINCIPLES**

1. Nudity on stage is not per se unchristian.
2. The understanding of the body is important for the understanding of man, theatre, just as other arts, can be helpful in this task.
3. A Christian college or university should be open even to controversial forms of expression.
4. There are forms of expression, particularly in entertainment, which a Christian college or university can be seen to only with severe restrictions (e.g., by presentation only in a true academic context) or not at all. An example would be a blackface minstrel show.
5. A concern for the financial integrity and the academic acceptance of a university is a true moral obligation.
6. There are times when a university must be willing to jeopardize its finances or its community acceptance, but only to safeguard a value of proportionate gravity.

May 9

1969 05 09 Theology Dept. Memo about Firehouse Theatre's play, May 9 1969
Position Paper
of the Department of Communication and Theatre
College of Saint Benedict
June 3, 1969

by
Sister Colman O'Connell
Mr. David O'Fallon

1969 06 03 Position Paper of the Department of Communication and Theatre, June 3 1969
Firehouse Theater goes on tour
The Dean at Notre Dame asks them not to perform.
Students rally and threaten a confrontation.
The Administration capitulated, provided that:

- the audience is warned
- the press is kept out

1969 06 01 Firehouse Restokes After Tour 'Confrontations'- The Minneapolis Tribune, 1969
Photo: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 151
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48990/rec/51
...and the yearbook sums it all up

The problem was not with the issue itself, but with its handling.

The administration had to defend its official procedures and channels. And the students had to assert their independence.

All of them did their own thing, but in the wrong way. The trustees, alumni and parents did wrong in choosing imposition, as if they were dealing with children; the administration in failing to demonstrate the validity and strength of their position; the students in rushing the events and endorsing the performance in an emotionally ill atmosphere.

The yearbook sums it all up. Maybe the performance by the Firehouse Theater Company at St. John’s did offend parents, alumni and trustees. Maybe it did represent a blunt disregard of the traditional Christian values of the school. Maybe it did show a lack of concern for the image of the institution. Maybe it did affect the development of students who were not mature enough to understand the play. And even maybe it was not brought to campus through the right channels.

Just a few months before, in the fall, the same group performed a similar play at St. Ben’s and, although the proper protests, disappointments and disapprovals filed in for the value they believe in and live by. The administration had to defend its official procedures and channels. And the students had to assert their independence.

All of them did their own thing, but in the wrong way. The trustees, alumni and parents did wrong in choosing imposition, as if they were dealing with children; the administration in failing to demonstrate the validity and strength of their position; the students in rushing the events and endorsing the performance in an emotionally ill atmosphere.

The problem was not with the issue itself, but with its handling.
“The Inebriated” May 17, 1998
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArcNews/id/38920/rec/21

“The Retort” May 12, 1997, p. 1
Compiled in March 2019
from resources in the archives of
the College of Saint Benedict,
Saint John's University,
and elsewhere as noted
by Peggy Landwehr Roske,
CSB/SJU Archivist
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Photo: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48840/rec/51
Drawing: 1968 10 29 The Torch p.2
Logo: https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/105988079784/firehouse-theater-holiday-program-special