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

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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!**

http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6285t58 “Firehouse Theater Company” (text) and https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/105988079784/firehouse-theater-holiday-program-special (logo)
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It's still a theater

https://www.google.com/maps/place/E+Lake+St+%26+Minnehaha+Ave,+Minneapolis,+MN+55406/@44.9483635,-93.2343042,160m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x87f62823950391f7:0x1740aa08a92de3c6!8m2!3d44.9483297!4d-93.2342743?hl=en
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Mixed Blood Theater celebrates Black History Month at CSB

by Sarah Hornage
Independent arts editor

The Mixed Blood Theater, in celebration of Black History Month, performed "Daughters of Africa" Wednesday, Feb. 10, in the Benedicta 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 eulogizes black women who have earned their place in America's history.

"Ideally women's history shouldn't be necessary," said Jill Schlick, a writer of the 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 advancements at different times and in different ways then 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 businesswoman. 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 Jackie Robinson; "According to Coyote," a collection of Native American legends; "Eastern Parade: The Asian American Journey and, coming in the fall of 1993, "Minnecosso," about growing up Chicanos in Minneapolis.

"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.

(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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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

Logo from Wikipedia
Photo: https://www.google.com/maps/place/1501+S+4th+St,+Minneapolis,+MN+55454/@44.9710483,-93.2491493,3a,75y,211.45h,91.63t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sgq6kAlz2gXbakegvbMXnpg!2e0!7i13312!8i6656!4m5!3m4!1s0x52b32d42db4c90ef:0x88424ac4104d0b1e!8m2!3d44.970849!4d-93.2493193
1968 10 04 Firehouse press release

The BAC opened in fall 1964.
Oct. 13 the Firehouse Theatre of Minneapolis will be bringing some "radical" one-act plays to the Benedicta Arts Center.

"Trinity" is a treatment of sex," stated Sister Colman, chairman of the Theatre Department. "It is, however, more than a merely sensational or sensational treatment, designed to tillate 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."

"What the Firehouse Company tries to do is not merely to entertain, but to delve into issues that matter and make the people aware of them. "Now, sex is obviously an issue that matters, but when you're dealing with any 'radical' issue, people tend to become upset," Sister Colman explained.

"Firehouse Company strives to lay open the center, challenge socio-political manifestations and declare its objections, fuse a union of experimentation and the old truths."

October 8, 1968
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

1968 10 29 p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/108/rec/34 and
p. 2 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/109/rec/34
p. 3 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/110/rec/3
Students Question Tastes in Theatre

In the Program Note, Sister Colman O’Connell wrote: "That the Firehouse’s treatment of sex yields no cheap thrills for adolescents will be clear to anyone who gives himself confidently to the theatre experience, trusting in the maturity of Megan Terry’s and Nancy Walter’s version to help him clarify his own."

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
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 response; vehement, bitter and impetuous response which stabbed the convictions of many people (I won't say individual 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 not reading or understanding what we had done by an older class.

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.
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.

Theater is the art of communication, and its purpose is to convey ideas, emotions, and experiences. It is a powerful medium for expressing the human condition and exploring the nature of existence. Theater can be a means of self-expression, a vehicle for social change, and a tool for personal growth.

In its earliest forms, theater was a way for communities to come together and share stories, but today it is a global phenomenon with a rich history and diverse cultures. Theater has evolved over time, and its forms have changed with the times. From Shakespearean drama to contemporary street theater, the possibilities are endless.

As a communications/theater major, I believe that theater has the power to move us, challenge us, and inspire us. It is a way to connect with others and to understand ourselves. I hope that through my work, I can contribute to the advancement of this art form and help to create a more just and compassionate world.

By Jan Bentley
Play Review

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To My Seat

By Meda Ellen Sexton

This fall Mike Steele, theater critic for the Minneapolis Tribune, did a study of avant garde theater. The question of smut came up: "smut for smut sake may not be art but it has been good social criticism. These words came to mind more than once when I saw the Firehouse Theatre Company in the production of Faust last Sunday night. Nobody goes to the Firehouse 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.

Audience is led into the avant guar theater individually. Some bearded huskie met me at the door, took me into the theatre, tossed me on his back and carried me pigggy-back across the stage, back again, 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, took off my coat and asked if I came to 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.

Heard footsteps and a few mumbles and grunts but could not see a thing until the lights went on. Then they really should 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 conceivable 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 one thing: The language, the g mumbling, the nausea, the contempt, the contempt for what sort of pretense carried me to this unknown place. The smut was flowing—rolling from every corner of the room. The language con

THE TORCH

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
April 9, 1969

The following is a listing of the series of events that occurred leading up to the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9th, 1969.

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.

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.

April 9 Wednesday

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
April 9, 1969

The following is a listing of the series of events run among the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969.

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

document dated April 9 Wednesday

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
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.
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.”
Theatre Group Performs Nude Scenes

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 Firesame Theater 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.

1969 04 10 Statement by Abbot Baldwin Dworschak, Firehouse Theatre, 1969 April 10
STATEMENT BY ABBOT BALDWIN DWORSCHAK, O.S.B.

4/10/69 P.M.

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.

April 10 Thursday

1969 04 10 Statement by Abbot Baldwin Dworschak, Firehouse Theatre, 1969 April 10
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.
St. John’s Permits Nude Play to Prevent Physical Violence

The Minneapolis Tribune, April 11, 1969

St. John’s University permits a nude play performed at the college’s theater to prevent what university officials feel is a threat of physical violence.

The play, performed by the theater department under the supervision of Dr. William Furry, was scheduled for tonight in the theater. According to Furry, the play is designed to depict the decay of society and to bring about a realization of the necessity for moral and social change.

The play will be performed without any costumes, and the audience will be seated in a circle around the stage. The performers will be nude, and the audience will be required to remain seated throughout the performance.

The university has received numerous complaints from parents and community members regarding the content and nature of the play. However, university officials have decided to go ahead with the performance in the belief that it is necessary to bring about a change in society.

The university has also taken steps to ensure the safety of the audience and performers. Fire safety equipment has been installed, and security personnel will be on duty throughout the performance. The university has also contacted local law enforcement agencies to ensure that the performance will not be disrupted.

The university hopes that the performance will spark a nationwide debate on the morality and necessity of nude performances in the arts. The university also hopes that the performance will encourage people to think about the state of society and to take action to bring about a change for the better.

Minneapolis Tribune April 11, 1969

1969 Sagatagan

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
No Discipline Expected
For Nude Play Planners

Pioneer Press News Service

COLLEGEVILLE — No disciplinary action is planned against students who sponsored presentation of a play at St. John's University over objections of the administration, according to the assistant to the president.

Donald Conway said the students did not violate any university rule, since presentation of events not directly sponsored by the school is allowed on the campus.

The performance of "Peast" by the Firehouse Theater of Minneapolis Thursday drew a critical statement from Archabald Win Overman, O.S.B., head of St. John's Abbey and university chancellor, who said the theater group "has a view, trespassing on the campus.'

Conway said the main objection was to "nudity on the stage," which he said is "inconsistent with the standards of a religious community and a Catholic college."

There are ample opportunities for presentation of a variety of plays and other cultural events at the college, Conway said, and the administration has suggested that "Peast" be presented in an academic context as part of a series of non-professional students' productions.

The students' group probably will issue a statement later in support of its presentation, he said, and the presentation was approved in the spring.
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 was not a real danger. Most 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 circumstance or design, into one in which power became paramount. For good or ill, all the ugly ramifications of unstrained power came to center stage and became the focus for debate and action. Trample power, Administration power, Monk power. Actual power and Executive power all came under attack by many of the students. TheTrample in case you missed the point. The students took it upon themselves to change an institution. They took this responsibility upon themselves without adequately weighing the pros and cons, without taking into account the doubts, 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, recriminations and emotionalism. Instead of taking the time to work out a solution which all could at least live with, if not wholeheartedly accept, somebody pulled 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 pseucads 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 buds?
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 SJS 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.

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33905/rec/40
1969 05 09 Theology Dept. Memo about Firehouse Theatre's play, May 9 1969 – written by the chair, Fr. Michael Blecker (who became SJU's president two years later)
The Theology Department weighs in:

CONCERNING:

Issues raised by the Firehouse Theatre’s play presented at St. 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 blockey, O.F.R.P.

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 current events an apology theology faculty proposes the following principles.

PRINCIPLES

1. Morality on stage is not sex or sexlessness.

2. The understanding of the body is important for the understanding of sex. 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 open 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 community 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
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 and
  • 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

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, disapprovals and disapprovals filed in for the values 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.
Standards change!

“The Inebriated” May 17, 1998
“Students protest signs which have caused a campus disruption. (photo by A. Ngry)

“The Retort” May 12, 1997

“The Inebriated” May 17, 1998 p. 3
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/38920/rec/21

The Retort” May 12, 1997, p. 1
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