

A Hell Of Thorniness Over “The Well of Horniness”

*Sexual Content Opens
Censorship Debate,
Sparks Uproar*

*Playwright and
“Times” Speak Out*

BY WILLIAM KLINE
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Administrative concerns over the sexual nature of the student-directed play, entitled “The Well of Horniness,” reopened a timeless conflict between discretion and censorship, the nature of which has attracted attention from The New York Times and the playwright, Holly Hughes. While faculty members said that the administration had invited, then uninvited, Robert Mahoney to present at the conference, college officials say that Mahoney applied like any other student.

The play was originally slated to appear among other student projects at the Undergraduate Research Conference, April 30th. Accustomed to controversy as the result of her role in a 1998 U.S. Supreme Court case, Hughes came forward to publicly denounce the college’s actions, characterizing their maneuvers as illegal censorship.

“I am so disappointed in the actions of the administration,” said Hughes.

Deemed a recruitment event, the prospect of subjecting minors to what may be considered offensive content spawned an “an on-going discussion” according to Bob Huber, the Vice President for Institutional Advancement. This left the fate of the performance tenuous. Others saw the discussion as a form of repression.

“There was never a decision to ban the play,” said Huber.

Nevertheless, a discourse emerged about first amendment rights in the days preceding the play’s sold-out debut. As the discussion evolved, faculty members protested the perceived denial of the play’s exhibition, and later, the display of a poster board featuring the title. The discussion culminated with the administration granting Mahoney the green light. On Thursday, April 30, Mahoney exhibited an excerpt of the play during the afternoon conference, despite the critical attention that surrounded it. The event hosted few high-school students, Mahoney said.

Faculty members, particularly from

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the departments of English and Performing and Creative Arts, have voiced their dissatisfaction over the administration’s original move to consider the appropriateness of the content.

“The fact that two upper-level administrators both exerted pressure on a student to curtail his participation at the conference,” said Professor Matthew Brim, Assistant Professor of Queer Studies, “indicates a systemic problem that needs to be addressed formally by the College.”

Several faculty members have charged the college with censorship, stifling creativity, and infringing upon the first amendment rights of students. The college contends that it never intended to censor, but to assure the suitability of the content for a younger audience.

“The first amendment guarantees the right to free speech,” said Adam Goldstein, an attorney advocate from the Student Press Law Center, “not the right to not be offended.” He later added: “If the rationale is that the content is going to offend, that’s a text book case of censorship.”

Huber refuted that notion, pointing to the multiple performance dates allotted for the play.

“I don’t know how a play that was performed over eight times can be considered censored,” said Huber. “Anyone who describes censorship in that way, it can be considered nonsensical.”

Despite the apparent passions the events have provoked, neither the administration, nor the performers, seemed eager to prolong the debate when the

play finally showed at the conference. The main characters of the off-stage drama displayed a willingness to reach a common understanding.

“I could see it from both ways,” said Robert Mahoney in reference to the college’s reservations, and the disapproval by students and faculty.

During the performance, several administrators displayed visible enjoyment, including Dean Francisco Soto, the departing dean of Humanities and Social Science, who laughed out loud at several suggestive jokes, and Associate Provost Susan Holak. The two administrators issued the original notification of the college’s decision, according to Professor Cindy Wong, the vice chair of the Faculty Senate executive committee. Even as a vocal critic of the practice, Wong commended Dean Soto and Associate Provost Holak for the support they later showed for the performers.

In helping overturn the prohibition, much attention has focused on an April 28th column by Jim Dwyer of the “New York Times”, which appeared on the front page of the New York section.

Others, such as the play’s narrator, Jessica Lynn Socol have pointed to the efforts of faculty members, especially professors George Sanchez and Maurya Wickstrom. The ultimate decision followed individual meetings between Dean Soto and professors Sanchez and Wickstrom, according to Wong, who also attended an April 27th meeting with the dean. After the meetings, Dean Soto issued his support, according to Wong.

Contrasting that belief, the college

suggested the prospective attendance of chaperones shaped their decision; the chaperone would determine the suitability of the play for a student under the age of 18 years old, according to Huber.

Although the play inevitably performed in its slot at the Undergraduate Research Conference, the spat revisited a perennial debate over students’ rights and administrative discretion, often debated in many private and public universities throughout the country. Many of the most vocal supporters of student’s rights expressed their belief that such a decision would set a dangerous precedent and limit student liberties.

“If anything, it’s created a dialogue,” said Socol, a senior stalwart of the dramatic arts department. “That’s what theatre is supposed to do.”

The dialogue incited the playwright herself, Holly Hughes. No stranger to issues of censorship, Hughes fought as a free-speech proponent in the landmark 1998 Supreme Court Case, *National Endowment for the Arts vs. Finley* (find-law.com).

“I’m honored that he chose my 25 year old play,” said Hughes, “which has been performed nationally in over 50 productions, including recent productions at the College of Charleston, S.C.”

As a result, the writer expressed anticipation of viewing the play when she visits the college during next Saturday’s showing.

“I applaud the courage of the students in doing play and their advisors who supported them,” said Hughes. “They deserve to be seen as heroes.”