

September 11, 2014

VIA FIRST CLASS MAIL & EMAIL

Mr. Jesse Smith
South Williamsport Jr./Sr. High School
700 Percy Street
South Williamsport, PA 17702
jsmith@swasd.org

Dear Mr. Smith:

We at the Dramatists Guild of America—the national organization of playwrights, composers, and lyricists—have been following the developments surrounding the cancellation of *Spamalot* in the South Williamsport Area School District. We now join together, on behalf of playwrights everywhere, in strong and unequivocal protest of your discriminatory motivations for cancelling this show.

In the past, when a school principal has considered censoring high school theater out of concern that the community needed some sort of preparation for a particular work's subject matter, the Dramatists Guild has offered help for such preparation. For instance, in a recent case in Trumbull, Connecticut, the show *Rent* was reinstated under these circumstances. But while we would gladly serve your community by helping place *Spamalot* and its various themes into context so that the production can go forward, your well-publicized emails from June imply that any preparation would be futile.

In fact, it appears that you wish to squander an opportunity for education by not only excluding so-called “homosexual themes” from community discussion, but also by distinguishing between homophobia and discrimination against a particular gender, race, ethnicity or nationality. This is, of course, a completely specious distinction.

Would you cancel a school production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* because of concern over the sensitivities of Holocaust deniers and those with anti-Semitic views in your community? That seems unlikely. Why then are you so solicitous of homophobia? Of course everyone is entitled to his own views, but yours is a public educational institution and thus has an obligation to educate, not merely to placate bigotry so as to avoid “controversy”. And if avoiding controversy was your sole purpose, you have clearly failed on that count in rather dramatic fashion.

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Lin-Manuel Miranda
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Lynn Nottage
Austin Pendleton
Jonathan Reynolds
Mary Rodgers
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John Patrick Shanley
David Shire
Stephen Sondheim
Jeffrey Sweet
Alfred Uhry
John Weidman
Michael Weller
George C. Wolfe
Charlayne Woodard
Maury Yeston

The reason we dramatists feel so strongly about this is that your actions strike at the very heart of the function of art and culture, as well as the purpose of education. While the arts may sometimes inspire us and support our social institutions, they may also unsettle and challenge us and make us question our values and assumptions. It must never be considered dangerous to encourage people to think. A culture evolves, in part, based on the provocation of its artists. The best theater, from *Oedipus Rex* to *South Pacific*, has always been provocative, challenging, and unsettling. That is part of what theater, art, and education are for.

You have cancelled the production of a popular, established, award-winning and widely-produced theatrical work because of your expressed belief that homosexual themes are somehow at odds with your community's values and put students in a "tough spot." In this way, you are using your authority to impose your own personal worldview on the choice of plays presented to the community. As the representative of writers of all political persuasions and sexual orientations, the writers of the Dramatist Guild vehemently oppose your actions and agenda.

If your students are either unable to present the show this year or are forced to produce it elsewhere instead, this would constitute a lost opportunity for your institution. But we're certain that if you allow the students to move forward with the show at your high school, you will find a great deal of support inside and outside of your community, both for the production and for your willingness to revisit the decision.

In the meantime, if there is anything we can do to help facilitate the reinstatement of the production, please let us know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen Schwartz". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Stephen Schwartz, President
Dramatists Guild of America