

Playing To The Puritans

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WITH the Disney Channel's "High School Musical" fast becoming the download of choice for tweens, it looks like we theater geeks are finally getting the attention we deserve.

And some we don't. Like in Fulton, Mo., where three members of a local church objected to the high school's fall production of the musical "Grease," even though one of them hadn't even seen it. In a response that would have made Joe McCarthy proud, Mark Enderle, the school superintendent, then proceeded to overturn the choice of "The Crucible," Arthur Miller's indictment of McCarthyism, as the spring play.

Instead, the students in Fulton just finished performing "A Midsummer Night's Dream," that wholesome frolic about youthful rebellion, pagan magic and bestiality. As Dr. Enderle told Wendy DeVore, the drama teacher, her actors "shouldn't do anything on stage that would get a kid in trouble if he did it in a classroom."

Next up, "Algebra! The Musical."

On second thought, one thing that will certainly get a student into trouble in a Fulton classroom is not reading "The Crucible," which is part of the 11th grade curriculum. I guess, like school prayer, reading "The Crucible" is something that has to be done silently.

Morally, "Grease" does seem pretty indefensible -- after all, its message is that if girls dress like tramps, boys will like them. Moreover, it portrays teenagers smoking, drinking, swearing and having sex -- in other words, reality. But "Grease" has also been one of the most performed high school musicals of the past 25 years, and it is shown regularly on ABC Family channel, which is also the home of Pat Robertson's "700 Club."

What's clear is that some folks in Fulton hope that by protesting "Grease" they can push back community standards to the very era the musical satirizes. Those who object to "Grease" and "The Crucible" seem to think these shows are the theatrical equivalent of sun exposure or asbestos -- something we thought was harmless but turned out to be lethal.

However, as a service to skittish evangelicals, I can produce conclusive proof that youthful dalliances with the hand jive and Arthur Miller will not turn students into lowlife reprobates. Not only do I belong to a generation that grew up reading "The Crucible" and lip-synching the "Grease" soundtrack into hairbrushes, but my suburban high school in Westfield, N.J., put on both shows. And, according to our parents, we were really, really good.

Our Danny Zuko was a popular boy I coerced into trying out for the show. After college, he moved back to our little hometown, became a lawyer, married a beautiful woman and had three loving children. He reads *The Wall Street Journal* regularly and votes Republican. At our 20th reunion, he told me wistfully, "Doing that play was probably the last unexpected thing I've done."

Likewise, the girl who played Abigail in our production of "The Crucible" did not become a vindictive harlot but instead went on to intern for Mr. Rogers. She's now the executive director of an organization that teaches parents how to prevent risky behavior in their teenagers -- you know, like the kind portrayed in "Grease."

And our John Proctor and Sandy Dumbrowski actually used their theatrical skills in the workplace, the former as an American spy in West Berlin, the latter as a roller-skating Muppet in "Sesame Street Live." They both, in their own ways, have made the world a safer place.

My high school castmates have become productive, respectable members of society -- raising children, paying taxes and, yes, occasionally still singing "Summer Nights" into their hairbrushes. I'm not sure what Fulton fears for its children, but it sounds as if some people won't be satisfied until we're all living like Puritans.

Just like "The Crucible."

CAPTION(S):

Drawing (Drawing by Jesse Lefkowitz)

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