

Censorship in Theatre

- Kathleen Alexandrou

Rent. Sweeney Todd. Cabaret. Avenue Q. The Crucible. Spring Awakening. American Idiot. Spamalot. To some, this might sound like a random string of words. Many, however, will recognize this as a list of great Broadway shows - all differing in content and style. What do they all have in common? Only one thing really; that they've been banned. Not globally, not nationally, not in a small theatre on an island in northern Maine; these shows have all been banned or challenged at American high schools within the past few years. Schools just like Marblehead. This is absolutely ridiculous. I've helped put on two of the nine shows I mentioned - *American Idiot* and *Cabaret* - and I have not been scarred for life. Actually, that isn't true. I do have a scar on my thumb from getting too close to a light. Besides that, I am totally fine. If anything, I'm a better person for doing those shows. Banning them for any reason is just silly.

Luckily, our Constitution forbids the banning of a show in the real world - doing so would be a violation of the First Amendment. Unluckily, high school theatre programs do not count as "the real world." The First Amendment has no bearing in cases like those; nine times out of ten it's the administration and vociferous parents who decide to ban a show. Is this fair? No. Why? Because all forms of censorship inhibit growth and learning, especially censorship of theatre.

As someone who practically lives in the theatre, I can tell you from experience that in order to become "good" at theatre, you have to keep ramping up the difficulty of the shows you do. To become a theatre professional, I'd need to take part in lots of shows with varying subject matter. Speaking as an aspiring lighting designer, for example, I cannot only light bright, happy musicals because then I won't ever learn how to light a more serious show like *Death of a Salesman*. It'd be like trying to paint using only one color. Many high school theatre programs thrive on the idea that their productions should appeal to everyone, a philosophy that leads them into choosing those well known, "bright happy musicals." *My Fair Lady, Oliver, Legally Blonde* - all of those are the kinds of shows high schools steer towards. While these shows are classics, this is a terrible idea! After a certain point, people will stop coming because they've seen the shows so many times. Additionally, despite the fact that most people who partake in school plays don't plan on pursuing theatre as a profession, they are "the potential next generation of audiences and donors for professional companies. If they are raised on a diet of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, how can we expect more challenging work, new work, or socially conscious work to sustain itself twenty years on?" (www.americantheatre.org). If they are only exposed to bright, happy musicals while in high school, theatre patrons will head towards these same shows later in life. That is a huge problem, and a perfect example of the lasting effects censorship can have.