

NOTRE DAME, IN - Vagina Monologues In, Bishops Out, Parents in the Dark

Last year's respite from on-campus performances of The Vagina Monologues has evidently ended. The play has departmental sponsorship and is slated for performance on March 24-26.

In an even more startling development, Father Jenkins has refused the request of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine that he not approve this performance because of the Committee's scheduled February 11-12 meeting on campus, and in consequence the bishops have moved their meeting off campus to Mishawaka and will not stay at the Morris Inn.

The details of this unhappy episode are set out in an articles just published in the [Irish Rover](#) and the [South Bend Tribune](#).

Here are the highlights:

- The Committee on Doctrine is chaired by Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport and includes five other bishops from, respectively, San Antonio, Washington, Toledo, Paterson, and Oakland. Cardinal George of Chicago is a consultant to the Committee, as is Dr. John Cavadini, Chair of the Notre Dame Theology Department and one of the conference's organizers.
- The Committee's seminar was to be held on campus on February 11-13, but when the bishops learned that the Vagina Monologues might be performed, they asked Father Jenkins to bar it. According to a Committee source, the bishops "did everything they possibly could to come to an agreement with the administration." Father Jenkins nevertheless turned them down.
- The bishops thereupon moved the conference to a convent in Mishawaka and decided to stay at the Inn at St. Mary's rather than the Morris Inn. (St. Mary's does not allow the Vagina Monologues.) Cardinal William Levada, the Vatican Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the keynote speaker, was also "in the loop," according to a Committee source,
- Bishop John M. D'Arcy, whose diocese includes Notre Dame, provided confirmation. He said, "Because of the likelihood of the presentation of . . . 'The Vagina Monologues' . . . the bishops made a collective decision to move the seminar off campus."
- In a terse statement, the University said that it had "worked collaboratively with the bishops to move the conference" and that it is "sure that our partnerships will continue in the future." Father Jenkins declined to be interviewed.

This episode evidences both the degree to which secularization has overtaken the University and also a most troubling estrangement of University and Church.

It is not as if the bishops were bent upon an inquisitorial suppression of a work of some arguable merit. The Chairman of one of the sponsoring departments described this venture as involving "teaching a 'different intellectual perspective.'" We describe in detail on the Project Sycamore web site the "[intellectual perspective](#)" of the play. Most of the monologues of any length are extraordinarily explicit accounts by women of highly charged sexual episodes, typically but not exclusively lesbian intercourse (including seduction of a minor) and masturbation. The play is, and is plainly intended to be, a celebration of the joys of sexual gratification through actions gravely immoral

in the eyes of the Church.

The promoters' oft-repeated claim that the play is dedicated to the theme of violence to women is a transparent smokescreen. Whoever lays it down -- not to put too fine a point on it -- lies. Here are the facts about the nearly invisible theme of sexual violence in the play:

In the 124 page text, there are but a scant seven pages relating to sexual violence, and they include descriptions of a 16th century witchcraft trial, a 19th century surgical procedure, and the cessation of genital cutting in Africa. Erase these passages and almost the whole play remains. But erase the passages celebrating homosexual, heterosexual, and autoerotic sex and the female sexual organ and there is no play left.

It is scarcely surprising, then, to learn that in selecting a performance date the organizers and the faculty took care that parents would not discover what is going on. In a comment notable for both its candor and its colossal understatement, the Chair of a sponsoring department "noted how Junior Parents' Weekend might be a bad weekend to have the play because 'some parents might be offended or upset.'"

The parents would not be fooled by the staging of learned post-performance faculty dissertations on the sociological and anthropological implications of the play. This was the method of inoculation prescribed by Father Jenkins before and is to be used again. The cure turned out before, and predictably will again, to be worse than the disease.

We describe those [faculty discussions](#) in detail on our website. In brief, but for a lone priest on one of the panels, the faculty members simply ignored the pernicious character of the play while praising it lavishly. One professor compared it to St. Augustine's Confessions. And the priest's criticism on moral grounds was greeted with barely subdued derision from one of his co-panelists and eloquent silence from the rest.

The problem is that pornography does not lend itself to solemn academic evaluation. One might as well analyze the sociology and anthropology of Larry Flynt's "Screw" magazine. The "Notre Dame straddle" looks like an artifice because it is.

Nor can it matter that again, as last time, the play will be performed in a "classroom" in DeBartolo Hall instead of a theatre. It is again to be produced three times instead of one, and the "classroom" in the Hall last time was described by The Observer (2/14/06) as a "nearly full auditorium." In any event, it is the sponsorship of the event, not the number who attend, that discloses the weakening of Notre Dame's Catholic identity.

This rebuff of the bishops and the Cardinal in favor of the supporters of The Vagina Monologues damages the reputation of Notre Dame as a genuinely Catholic institution with sustaining links to the Church. As the news of this action spreads from these bishops and the Vatican, Notre Dame may well be seen as taking a step toward the company of those ersatz Catholic institutions that seem to take perverse pleasure in defying the hierarchy. On the Vagina Monologues issue, the small and shrinking number of [dissidents](#) is now down to 20 (mostly Jesuit) out of over 200 institutions. The return of Notre Dame will doubtless give pleasure to many.

One slender hope remains. While the Administration has given "tentative approval"

and the departments have voted unanimously to sponsor the play, the panel program has not yet been submitted to Arts and Letters Dean Mark Roche for final approval. There is no reason to suppose that this will be withheld, and even if it were the rebuff to the bishops could not be recalled; but at least for the moment alumni and others can request that Father Jenkins deny authorization. Thereafter, protests will be in order.

We urge those of you who share our views to communicate promptly with Father Jenkins and to enlist others to do so. [Click here](#) to send Father Jenkins an e-mail, or mail your comments to:

Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.
Office of the President
400 Main Building
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

In addition, please sign our [petition](#) if you have not done so, and forward this message through the link at the bottom to all you think might be interested. We will, of course, write Father Jenkins once again on behalf of Project Sycamore.

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Sincerely,

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web: <http://www.projectsycamore.com>