

January 24, 2017

President J. Barry Dickinson
Members of the School Board
Cherry Hill Public Schools Board of Education
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Dear President Dickinson and Members of the Board:

As a coalition of organizations concerned with protecting free artistic expression, we write to express our concerns about the redaction of racial epithets from the musical *Ragtime* at Cherry Hill High School East. We urge you to reconsider this educationally harmful and legally problematic decision and allow the musical to be staged in its full integrity.

Our understanding is that Cherry Hill High School East has been preparing to stage a production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Ragtime* for the last several months with the play scheduled to open on March 10. On January 18 the Camden County East Branch of the NAACP sent a letter to Superintendent Joseph Meloche and condemned the decision to perform a musical that included racial slurs. The Cherry Hill African American Civil Association also met in person with the administration to express its concerns. Soon afterwards, school officials released a statement saying the school would “remove offensive language from the enacted script.” The musical is set in the early 1900s and explores the lives of a wealthy white American family, a family of Jewish immigrants, and an African-American ragtime musician in Harlem. At several times throughout the musical, characters utter a racial slur.

Staging a musical provides an engaging educational experience. Musicals enable student-actors to explore and embody perspectives and social circumstances that differ from their own. At their best musicals deeply move audience members to think about the complexities of the human experience. *Ragtime*, of course, is no exception to this rule, as those who perform and view the show will gain insights into American culture of the early twentieth century.

Redacting the script will undercut these benefits. *Ragtime*'s use of racial slurs is an historically accurate and necessary aspect of a play that explores race relations in the early 1900s. *Ragtime* helps minors understand the brutalities of racism and the anger that has historically accumulated, partly through the use of racially offensive language. In contrast, **censorship of such language ignores historical reality and presents a**

Joan E. Bertin
Executive Director

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Orthopsychiatric Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of the Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The Newspaper Guild/CWA
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Union of Democratic Intellectuals
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
Office of Communication
United Methodist Church,
United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

falsified, whitewashed view of race relations. Censoring the play will only perpetuate ignorance of our past.

While we empathize with concerns about the emotionally disturbing effects of hearing or uttering racial slurs, we believe such concerns are to be resolved through educational means, not by censoring a renowned text. In our experience, similar concerns (around productions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men*, for instance) have best been confronted through dialogue rather than censorship. As Cherry Hill Public Schools has noted in its statement, students “will participate in learning activities stemming from *Ragtime* in an effort to use our history to further expose the ugliness of racism.” These activities will benefit all students, especially if they allow students to explore the complex relationship between free speech, theater, history, and literature. On the other hand, **copyright law and licensing agreements.** In the absence of explicit permission from copyright holders, any modification of the text can lead to a revocation of Cherry Hill High School East’s right to perform the musical.

Finally, we note that **copyright law and licensing agreements.** In the absence of explicit permission from copyright holders, any modification of the text can lead to a revocation of Cherry Hill High School East’s right to perform the musical.

In summary, we urge you to reconsider and reverse your decision to censor *Ragtime*. When paired with learning activities that further explore historical racism, performance of the uncensored musical will provide students with valuable and enriching educational experiences.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Mintcheva
National Coalition Against Censorship



Ralph Sevush
Dramatists Guild of America



Howard Sherman
Arts Integrity Initiative

