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November 10, 2021

Superintendent Tim Davis
Hillsboro City Schools
39 Willettsville Pike
Hillsboro, OH 45133
EMAIL: tdavis@hillsboro-indians.org

Dear Superintendent Davis:

As national organizations committed to artistic and intellectual freedom, the Dramatists Legal Defense Fund (and its parent organization, The Dramatists Guild of America) and the National Coalition Against Censorship are deeply troubled by Hillsboro High School's cancellation of the scheduled October production of Qui Nguyen's play, *She Kills Monsters*, due to allegations about the play's content.

There is no question about the play's educational and artistic merit. It premiered in New York in 2011 to glowing reviews and was later presented at the [Steppenwolf Theatre Company](#) in Chicago. Following a 2013 award by the American Alliance for Theater and Education, the play has been staged close to 800 times, mostly by high schools and colleges throughout the country.

Regardless of its demonstrated qualities, however, you cancelled the production after it was already weeks into rehearsals, attributing your decision to the play's use of "inappropriate language, profanity, homophobic slurs, sexual innuendos and graphic violence." The fact is, though, that the script being used was the "Young Adventurers Version," which is a gentler version prepared by the author for children above age 11.

Furthermore, parents reported that the alleged "homophobic slurs" had already been deleted from the text and, at an October 18 meeting with parents, you were advised that the directors were also willing to work with you to revise other problematic language (reportedly, "ass", "hell", and "damn" were troublesome). This, despite the fact that such words had been used in prior Hillsboro productions (like "*Les Miserables*", "*Into the Woods*", "*Oklahoma!*", "*Light in the Piazza*" and "*Clue*").

As for your other stated rationales for cancellation, the "graphic violence" of the play's bloodless stage combat and its "sexual innuendos" were no more intense (and in some cases, far less so) than that presented in those prior Hillsboro productions, including the violence and sexual degradations depicted in *Les Miz* and the dark sexual fantasies that lead to murder in *Oklahoma*.

In any event, if vaguely defined "sexual innuendos" were a reason to ban plays from school productions, many canonical dramatic works would be off-limits. Would *Romeo and Juliet* be cancelled for its sexual innuendos?

Would *Oedipus Rex* be banned because it deals with the taboo sexual theme of incest? No doubt one could raise numerous moral, religious, or personal objections to plays that have been performed in Hillsboro High School in the past. So why was *She Kills Monsters* singled out for cancellation?

Some who attended the October meeting with you have alleged that the last-minute cancellation was really a response to complaints from a few parents (and a church pastor they invited to the meeting), about the play's implications that one character is gay. As an essential element of the story, that could not be changed (the play was nominated for a GLAAD award due to its positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community, so changes to that plot point would have been a betrayal of the work).

You deny that the pastor's objections had anything to do with the subsequent cancellation, but based on the prior production history at Hillsboro and the timing of the complaints by a local religious leader, the play's cancellation makes your claim appear unpersuasive.

Whatever concerns some individuals in your community may have about the possible sexual identity of one character in the play, these do not justify its cancellation. A school's sponsorship of a theatrical production does not constitute endorsement of its content or ideas, and no student is required to accept any ostensible "message" in it, any more than exposure to paintings of Christian saints requires the viewer to believe in a particular religious doctrine.

Indeed, our constitutional system is designed to prevent the government from promoting or preferring any viewpoint over others. It is well-settled law that the First Amendment prohibits government officials, including public school superintendents, from inhibiting the expression of ideas and opinions simply because they dislike or disapprove of them.

Not only does the decision to cancel the play raise serious legal and constitutional concerns, but – given that complaints focused primarily on the implied sexual identity of a character – it also sends a message of intolerance to the entire community that could intimidate homosexual students, undermine their education, and promote a discriminatory environment in school.

Every community is home to a diversity of opinions on moral, religious, and sexual questions. No matter how strong the views of some members of the community may be, though, they have no right to impose their views on others, or expect the public schools to reflect their beliefs at the expense of others. Cancelling *She Kills Monsters* impermissibly privileges the beliefs of some individuals over others and is likely to make the district susceptible to many other complaints demanding the cancellation of plays and removal of books from library shelves and school curricula.

In our experience, controversies of this kind are best handled by enriching rather than restricting the conversation surrounding shared community values. A similar incident around *Rent* in Trumbull High School in Connecticut some years ago cost the school much negative publicity on the national level before the school finally decided to go ahead with the production and add post-show conversations.

We urge you to reverse the cancellation at Hillsboro and, in the future, institute a process for considering and responding to community complaints about dramatic productions that would also demonstrate respect for young people's intellectual freedom, a commitment to an educational process inclusive of diverse ideas and viewpoints, and could serve as an example to your students of the importance of the First Amendment.

Sincerely,



Ralph Sevush, Executive Director, Dramatists Legal Defense Fund

Svetlana Mintcheva, Director of Programs, National Coalition Against Censorship

NATIONAL ■■■
■■■ COALITION
AGAINST ■■■
■■■ CENSORSHIP

cc: Joe Turner, Principal, Hillsboro High School