Censorship on Campus:

*lights a few fires*

http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6285t58 “Firehouse Theater Company” (text) and
https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/105988079784/firehouse-theater-holiday-program-special (logo)
In the summer of 1963, a University of Minnesota graduate student, an artist, an actor, and an actor/director renovated an abandoned 1894 fire station in Minneapolis as the Firehouse Theater.

The company held its first performance just a few weeks before the Guthrie Theater held their opening show.

The group conceived the theater as a venue for avant-garde drama and as a vehicle for new playwrights in the area.

The Firehouse company moved to California in 1969 and closed not long after.

But first they lit a few fires at St. Ben’s and St. John’s!

http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6285t58  “Firehouse Theater Company” (text) and https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/105988079784/firehouse-theater-holiday-program-special (logo)
https://www.google.com/maps/place/E+Lake+St+%26+Minnehaha+Ave,+Minneapolis,+MN+55406/@44.9636163,-93.2351029,21247m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x87f62823950391f7:0x1740aa08a92de3c6!8m2!3d44.9483297!4d-93.2342743?hl=en
It's still a theater
Mixed Blood Theater celebrates Black History Month at CSB

by Sarah Horsager
Independent arts editor

The Mixed Blood Theater, in celebration of Black History Month, performed "Daughters of Africa" Wednesday, Feb. 10, in the Benedicta Art Center Forum. The show presents a dynamic history of black American women and their stories of courage and strength.

"Daughters of Africa," written by award-winning playwright Syl Jones, featured Patricia Pendleton accompanied by pianist Roland Wilson and was directed by Warren C. Bowles.

The performance consists of a musical look into the history of black American women, rather than the history of black American men. Throughout history, black women have faced unique situations because of their cultural roles, and "Daughters of Africa," recognizes and commends black women who have earned their place in America's history.

"Actually women's history shouldn't be necessary," said Jill Schlick, a senior history major at CSB.

However Schlick also goes on to say that much of what we've recorded historically is political, a realm from which women were, until recently, excluded. And women have often made historical advancement at different times and in different ways than men, so women's history must be recognized and studied.

Celebrated in the program are dynamic and influential women like Harriet Tubman, the conductor of the Underground Railroad, who led hundreds of blacks to freedom; Elizabeth Freeman, whose legal struggle helped abolish slavery in Massachusetts; and Madame C.J. Walker, America's first black millionnaire. The songs included in the performance are melodies made famous by Besse Smith, Lena Horne, Janet Jackson as well as a list of others.

"Daughters of Africa," is only one of six touring productions offered by The Mixed Blood Theater, which bases itself in a century-old firehouse in Minneapolis. The others include biographical accounts on Martin Luther King, Paul Robeson, and Jane Robinson; "According to Coyote," a collection of Native American legends; "Eastern Parade The Asian American Journey and coming to the fall of 1993, "Minnesota," about growing up Chisano in Minnesota.

(Not to be confused with the Mixed Blood Theater, which has also performed at CSB, and which also is located in a converted Minneapolis firehouse.)
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(Not to be confused with the Mixed Blood Theater, which has also performed at CSB, and which also is located in a converted Minneapolis firehouse.)
The Mixed Blood Theatre Company is a professional multiracial theatre company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was founded in 1976 by artistic director Jack Reuler.

-Wikipedia

Logo from Wikipedia
Photo: https://www.google.com/maps/place/1501+S+4th+St,+Minneapolis,+MN+55454/@44.9710483,-93.2491493,3a,75y,211.45h,91.63t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sgq6kAlz2gXbakegvbMXng!2e0!7i13312!8i6656!4m5!3m4!1s0x52b32d42db4c90ef:0x88424ac4104d0b1e!8m2!3d44.970849!4d-93.2493193
October 4, 1968
press release

FIRST MAJOR DRAMA OFFERING OF THE SEASON SET FOR OCT. 13 AT COLLEGE

ST. JOSEPH, Minn. --- Two "transformation" plays, performed by the Firehouse Theatre Company from Minneapolis, will open the 1968-69 season of drama at the College of St. Benedict Sunday (October 13).

Set for 8 p.m., the plays are open to the public. Admission prices are $2.50 for adults and $1.55 for students. Both plays will be in the Benedicta Arts Center Forum.

Titled "Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place" and "Trinity," the plays are by Megan Terry and Nancy Walter, respectively.

Miss Terry also is the author of "Inet Rock" which was performed at the College last year. Miss Walter is a member of the Firehouse troupe.

Both plays opened very recently in Minneapolis at the Firehouse Theatre.

The BAC opened in fall 1964.
“Trinity” is a treatment of sex,” stated Sister Colman, chairman of the Theatre Department. “It is, however, more than a merely sensual or sensational treatment, designed to titillate the adolescent theatre-goer in the manner of a ‘Playboy’ photo. Instead, it probes deeply into an issue that really matters in our time, by asking, ‘Is sex the answer to our hunger for communion?’

In asking such a question, so-called ‘sexy’ scenes may be artistically necessary for the playwright to work through to a truthful answer. Hopefully, our audience will be mature enough to follow the play’s probing to the point of insight, rather than becoming shocked on the journey toward the vision.”

“Now, sex is obviously an issue that matters, but when you’re dealing with any ‘radical’ issue, people tend to become upset,” Sister Colman explained.

October 8, 1968

1968 10 08 p.3  http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/357/rec/2
Page 1 of the next issue of *The Torch* has a feature on the reopening of the local hangout for college students...

...and two of its eight pages are about the Firehouse production, including Letters to the Editor...

October 29, 1968

1968 10 29 p. 1
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/108/rec/34 and
p. 2 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/109/rec/34
p. 3  http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/110/rec/3
Students Question Tastes in Theatre

1) In the Program Note, Sister Colman O'Connell wrote: "That the Firehouse's treatment of sex yields no cheap thrills for adolescents will be clear to anyone who gives himself confidently to the theatre experience, trusting in the maturity of Megan Terry's and Nancy Walter's version to help him clarify his own."

To this I answer now: Can anyone who saw this "performance" come away from the theatre without disturbing doubts as to the prurient interests entertained?

October 29, 1968
Students Question
Tastes in Theatre

Faculty and students have
discussed, argued and lectured.
Two hours at the Forum.
Sunday night, October 13,
brought the freshman class
into an acme of response,
vehement, bitter and impetuous
response which stabbed
the convictions of many
people (I won't say indivi-
duals) in the freshman class.

Sunday night I missed the
point. When I walked out, I
thought I'd never go to see a
Firehouse production again.

Monday's Basic Studies
class, however, reached an
honesty, an openness (or a
closing for some)

October 29, 1968
The product of a liberal arts education: an open-minded student

October 29, 1968

1968 10 29 The Torch p.2
and
Play Review

A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To My Seat

By Meda Ellen Sexton

This fall Mike Steely, theater critic for the Minneapolis Tribune, did a study of avant garde theater. The question of smut came up—"smut for smut's sake may not be art but it has been good social criticism. These words came to mind more than once when I saw the Firehouse Theatre Company in the production of Faust last Sunday night.

Nobody goes to the Firehouse with the sole intention of viewing a play. If that is what you have in mind it is discarded from the minute you walk in the door. Each member of the audience is a participant—the amount of participation depends on whether you came to see Faust or the Firehouse.

sisted mainly of four-letter words uncomfortably forced from the actors as they crawled unlabeled or kept feverishly among the audience. This roving and jumping about was broken-up for a moment by a senseless step of fourteen members of the cast. There was no purpose or reasoning for it. The Firehouse did it once in JackJack and it was a success. True beauty and innocence was mercurial, as they thought they'd try it again. A clear case of overacting a good thing.

The language, the gnomes with the audience, and the strip act were more incongruous—little aside taking up a greater portion of the show.

Each minute of the audience is led into the voids the theatre individually. Some bearded huskies met me at the door, took me into the theatre, tossed me on his back and carried me pigg-y-back across the stage, back again, up and down a number of steps, set me down on the bare floor in a place I discovered was to be my seat for the evening. I took off my coat and asked if I could see Faust or be Faust. I told him I came to see Faust and he went on about his business as normal—whatever that may be.

I heard footsteps and a few mounds and groans but could not see a thing until the bath went on. They really should not have gone to all the trouble to flip the switch. Edward Albee's definition of the avant garde seems to fit perfectly here. "There is a conceivable breakdown of language and communication and elaborate work of building the audience." It really wouldn't have made much difference if the entire show was performed in the dark except for the first act. I did enjoy knowing where and on what I was sitting and who was next to me and I must admit I was curious to know what sort of creature carried me to this unknown. The mist was floating—reducing every corner of the room. The language could not talk about the man who sells his soul to the devil. They tried too hard, they pushed us too hard and unfortunately smothered themselves and the audience.

The actors went around to each of us individually to let us know it was over—"a good thing really. I wouldn't have known when to have gone home. They invited us to stay and see it over again from the beginning and being a good sport about the whole thing I decided to stay. At this point, the Firehouse was separated from the Be Fausters. A parachute was dropped from the ceiling upon the group of Be Fausters and I waited forty-five minutes for something to happen—nothing did. I saw a man get out from under the parachute and asked him what was happening all this time.

"It's the best love I've ever been to and under a parachute, freak out!"

I sat and watched a masked love-in for almost an hour and thought it was part of the show. On the way out I saw a weird-looking guy, who looked like he had a part in all this, in the back of the theatre and asked him what the deal was.

"I don't know the actors left forty-five minutes ago so I'm supposed to wait till they all leave so I can turn off the lights and go home."
The earliest document about what happened later at SJU is an April 7 (Easter Monday) 1969 treatise written by Bill Van Cleve.

As The Record documents later:

The salient aspects of the recent Firehouse Theater controversy are fairly common knowledge, namely, that an avant-garde theater group known as the Firehouse Theatre produced a play on campus which contained scenes of male and female nudity. The controversy which surrounded this production has caused serious repercussions both within and without the immediate St. John’s community.

Bill Van Cleve was the SJU’s Director of Student Affairs from 1967-69 and Director of Counseling & Institutional Research from 1969-70 (and then the Registrar).

April 7 Monday
Firehouse's two performances, *Rags* and *Faust*, were to be sponsored by the Owl's Head Coffee House and subsidized by the Undergraduate Student Government.

The appropriate channels had been followed:

- Fr. Eugene in Academic Affairs was contacted to check for scheduling conflicts.
- A verbal agreement was made for the use of the gym with Mr. George Durenberger.
- Housing for the company and publicity were arranged.

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
On Tuesday, April 8:

Word reached...interested students and faculty that Fr. Colman wished to meet with everyone responsible for the tentative appearances of the Firehouse.

The word was out that pressure was being applied to cancel the Firehouse.

That afternoon the Administrative Council met from 1 PM to 3 PM, and several members, along with Fr. Colman, met with the concerned and responsible students at 4 PM.

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
Fr. Colman felt proper channels were not used.

Trustees and “concerned friends of St. John’s…were upset (to put it mildly)...”

The appearance:

- could endanger the capital funds drive
- would conflict with prevailing views of the local community
- would damage St. John’s image
- would endanger future appropriations by the legislature to the MN Fine Arts Commission
- might precipitate resignations by trustees and faculty

April 9 Wednesday

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
The students offered positive proposals:

- statements would be released to the media disassociating SJU and clarifying who was responsible
- the Theater department and the acting company would hold lectures and discussions
- the audience would be restricted to SJU, CSB, and SCSU members
- Firehouse would be asked to perform one of the plays without nudity

The document dated April 9 Wednesday

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1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
The negotiations dragged on for three hours...

It became apparent that the only compromise acceptable to Fr. Colman (and the board, alumni and friends) was cancellation.

The students were placed in the position of accepting “total” responsibility for all consequences.

The students accepted cancellation of the performances in exchange for a guarantee that Firehouse would be back in the fall as part of a Theatre perspective week, and that the $500 penalty for breaking the contract would be taken care of by Fr. Colman.

---

1969 04 09 A Series of Events Concerning the Firehouse Theatre prior to April 9, 1969
Thursday, April 10

- Students were to meet with administrators to continue discussions.

- Students arranged for the play to be performed at Avon’s Lakeview Ballroom Thursday evening.

- The ballroom’s proprietor cancelled it when he “found out it wasn’t just another St. John’s and St. Ben’s activity.”

- One student said the earlier performance at St. Ben’s touched off some complaints “by people in the community who didn’t see the play.” That helped “create outside agitation against Firehouse.”
The play “Faust” *did* go on -

“In order to prevent the possibility of any violence on our campus.”

---

1969 04 St. Cloud Visitor Theatre Group Performs Nude Scenes
STATEMENT BY ABBOT BALDWIN DWRORSCHAK, O.S.B.

4/10/69 P.M.

The Firehouse Theater group is appearing on the Saint John's campus this evening without any official endorsement of Saint John's Abbey, the University faculty, or students of this institution.

It is our view that this group of players is trespassing on our campus. They are appearing here despite the fact that no contractual agreement exists between them and any responsible individual on this campus.

We have regretfully permitted the players to perform this evening in order to prevent the possibility of violence on our campus. Emotions have run extremely high among our students. Many have urged that the performance be permitted because of what they conscientiously believe to be a matter of academic freedom. Many others share the view of the Abbey and University administration that the performance violates what we in this Christian community consider as acceptable and decent standards of conduct and deportment.
We make no judgment as to the artistic or aesthetic value of this performance.

We are concerned here exclusively with maintaining and nourishing the Christian ideals and principles for which this institution has stood for well over a century.

I wish to state categorically that we do not approve of this performance.

We have permitted it to take place only because we wish above all to prevent physical violence on this campus.

Like any human organization, some of our procedures are faulty. Our lines of communication with the students break down in rare instances. We intend to correct this situation promptly and to clarify in a most explicit way for our students and their parents that Saint John's, as a liberal arts college in a Christian context -- will remain precisely that. We do not intend to compromise our principles nor to permit on this campus theatrical performances or other activities which are offensive to the large majority of this community.
The Record wasn’t a weekly then, and wasn’t published between March 21 and April 18 (because of Easter/spring break) – but it documented things after they happened.
A discussion was then arranged for Thursday at one p.m. in the Great Hall at which time the entire student body was to express their opinion. Fr. Abbot, Fr. Colman and members of the Administrative Council were all present to talk to the students.

April 10 Thursday
Photos: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 150

The Record April 18, 1969, p. 3
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33847/rec/4
Photos: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 150
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48989/rec/51
A discussion was then arranged for Thursday at one p.m. in the Great Hall at which time the entire student body was to express their opinion. Fr. Abbot, Fr. Colman and members of the Administrative Council were all present to talk to the students. The end result of this meeting was that the students demanded a vote be taken to decide whether the play would be allowed.
Vote results:  
YES: 514  
NO: 400  
Other: 40

The Record April 18, 1969, p. 1  
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33845/rec/4  
and p. 3 http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33847/rec/4
1969 04 11 St. John's Permits Nude Play to Prevent Physical Violence, Mpls Trib
Photo: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 150
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48989/rec/51
1969 04 Pioneer Press “No Discipline Expected...”
Who’s Kidding Whom? Censorship Not The Issue

The recent production of the Firehouse Threater on this campus brought to light several issues which are vital to the future of St. John’s University. One of these was censorship at SJU. The fact that Firehouse still plays indicate that censorship was not a real change. More covert forms of censorship, in the form of various kinds of “pressure,” were and still are the basic form of the censorship issue.

At the beginning of the debate over Firehouse, censorship might have been crucial. But at some point the situation deteriorated, by circumstance or design, into one in which power became paramount. For good or ill, all the ugly ramifications of unrestrained power came to center stage and became the focus for debate and action.

Truste power, Administration power, Monk power, Allied power and Faculty power all came under attack by many of the students. The Trustees in case you missed the point. The students took it upon themselves to change an institution. They took this responsibility upon themselves without adequately becoming informed, without adequately weighing the pros and cons, without taking into account the desires, fears and feelings of all the people who are a part of this institution known as St. John’s Abbey and University.

The tragedy of all this lies in the fact that this change, which has at least the possibility of being injurious to St. John’s, was brought about in an atmosphere of distrust, recrimination and emotionalism. Instead of taking the time to work out a solution which all could at least live with, if not wholeheartedly accept, somebody placed St. John’s into diving into the lake without checking the rocks. Whether the rocks are really there or not does not make the act of jumping any more reasonable.

—Ford
Cracks in the Sidewalk
by Spikes

It's been awhile since I last took the time to jot down a few of my
perverted thoughts for this column. I realize that too much has been said about
the Firehouse Theatre episode and I know I should let it die, but I must
make a few observations. My apologies for my tardiness.

As far as the whole mess is concerned, I think all of us have witnessed a
living example of how pussycats have a way of turning into tigers with the
aid of the right people. My interpretation of the affair:

First of all, Firehouse asks may we please come and show our bods?
Fearless Leader says yes, please do.

Then the boys with the coin threaten to pick up their balls and bats and
go home if Sunny St. Jack's allows a skin show to proceed as planned cuz
they never got to see stuff like that—they had to be content with their dirty
jokes and pre-Playboy magazines.

Fearless Leader says no.

Then the Liberated Kids get together and decide that if gunkies from other
colleges do it then they better do it, too, cuz what would SDS say about SJU
if there wouldn't be any demonstrations and other groovy stuff like that
here—except that the SJU Liberated Kids don't know exactly how to react.
They could follow the example of their peers from Columbia, Berkeley,
Harvard, Cornell, etc., and turn the campus into a war zone. Instead, they call
for a general meeting of the community. Non-violent. I repeat, non-violent.

The press and other big mouths love it—a chance for a really big story
right here in central Minnesota. "Now we can catch up with the big guys."
Debate from both sides at the general meeting.

Trusted Trustee says love you.
Fearless Leader says no, then maybe, then what the hell! Let's vote on it.
The majority says yes.

Fearless Leader says nothing and blushes.

Spiritual Leader gets into the act and says no, but in order to prevent
violence the show must go on. Hurky Dorey. And Pontius Pilate, in order
to prevent violence, washed his hands and delivered Jesus into the hands
of the crowd to be crucified. Nice reasoning.

The show goes on, almost incidentally.

Trusted Trustee and friends grab their bags of gold and retire to their
respective vaults. The school is penniless.

The Record editorial staff and other Goldwaterites point accusing fingers
at the Liberated Kids.

Fearless Leader, the individual who could have settled the entire matter
early in the campaign with a simple, meaningful yes or no and handled the
alumni and students with his usual aplomb, sits in his office and blushes.
And the beat goes on.

April 30
The Record, p.2

...1969-04-30, The Record, p.2
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33905/rec/40
The Theology Department weighs in:

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY
SAINT JOHN’S UNIVERSITY
COLLEGEVILLE, MINNESOTA 55321

May 9, 1969

MEMO TO:
The Chancellor of Saint John’s University,
Abbot Balbeto Bonnschuh, O.S.B.
The members of the Board of Trustees,
Saint John’s University
The College of Saint Benedict
The President of Saint John’s University,
Father Coleman J. Sorrey, O.S.B.
The President of The College of Saint Benedict,
Sr. Winifred J. O’Gorman
The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of Saint John’s University,
Father Hilary E. Thomeich, O.S.B.
The Dean of The College of Saint Benedict,
Sister Prisca Fischer, O.S.B.
The Dean of the School of Divinity of Saint John’s University,
Father Vitus E. Bucher, O.S.B.
The Dean of The Graduate School of Theology of Saint John’s University,
Father Alfred M. Tegela, O.S.B.
Mother Heimita Overdorff, C.S.B.

CONCERNING:
Moral issues raised by the Firehouse Theatre’s play presented at Saint John’s University.

FROM:
The Chairman of the Department of Theology of Saint John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict, Father Michael Paulus Blecker, O.S.B.

May 9
The Theology Department weighs in:

COMMENTS:

Real issues raised by the Firehouse Theatre's play presented at Saint John's University.

FROM:

The Chairman of the Department of Theology of Saint John's University and The College of Saint Benedict, Father Michael Paulin Eckerer, O.P.H.

The members of the Theology Department of Saint John's University and The College of Saint Benedict at the business meeting of May 7, 1969, voted 11 to 5 that the following statement be distributed to the admissions of Saint John's University and The College of Saint Benedict. In accordance, therefore, with the directive of the faculty of the Department of Theology the following statement is proposed for your consideration:

INTRODUCTION:

Concrete moral decisions are seldom simple. In order to help in the evaluation of current events an expose the Theology faculty proposes the following principles:

PRINCIPLES

1. Reality on stage is not sin or wickedness.

2. The understanding of the body is important for the understanding of man. Theatre, just as other arts, can be helpful in this task.

3. A Christian college or university should be open even to controversial forms of expression.

4. There are forms of expression, particularly in entertainment, which a Christian college or university can be seen to only with severe restrictions (e.g., by presentation only in a true academic context) or not at all. An example would be a blackface minstrel show.

5. A concern for the financial integrity of the community acceptance of a university is a moral obligation.

6. There are times when a university must be willing to jeopardize its finances or its community acceptance, but only to safeguard a value of proportionate gravity.

May 9

1969 05 09 Theology Dept. Memo about Firehouse Theatre's play, May 9 1969
Position Paper
of the Department of Communication and Theatre

College of Saint Benedict

June 3, 1969

by
Sister Colman O'Connell
Mr. David O'Fallon

1969 06 03 Position Paper of the Department of Communication and Theatre, June 3 1969
Firehouse Theater goes on tour
The Dean at Notre Dame asks them not to perform. Students rally and threaten a confrontation. The Administration capitulated, provided that:

• the audience is warned and
• the press is kept out

1969 06 01 Firehouse Restokes After Tour 'Confrontations'- The Minneapolis Tribune, 1969
Photo: 1969 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 151
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48990/rec/51
...and the yearbook sums it all up

The values they believe in and live by. The administration had to defend its official procedures and channels. And the students had to assert their independence.

All of them did their own thing, but in the wrong way. The trustees, alumni and parents did wrong in choosing imposition, as if they were dealing with children; the administration in failing to demonstrate the validity and strength of their position; the students in rushing events and endorsing the performance in an emotionally ill atmosphere.

The problem was not with the issue itself, but with its handling.
“The Inebriated” May 17, 1998
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/38920/rec/21

The Retort” May 12, 1997, p. 1