

Bishop Finds Notre Dame Events Revolting

by Tim Drake

SOUTH BEND, Ind. - Rebecca Austen said she knew the University of Notre Dame had secular influences before she arrived in 2003, but she admitted that the university's Queer Film Festival caught her completely off guard. "This shouldn't be happening at Notre Dame," Austen, a second-year law student, said. Yet it did — for the second year in a row — in opposition to Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop John D'Arcy's protestations. The Feb. 10-12 festival featured a variety of films exploring homosexuality and same-sex unions. Panel discussions and talks featured School Sister of Notre Dame Jeannine Gramick, who has been permanently barred by the Vatican from any pastoral work involving homosexuals because of "doctrinally unacceptable" views, and Terrence McNally, playwright of the blasphemous theatrical production *Corpus Christi*.

The festival was followed one week later by a campus performance of the controversial play *The Vagina Monologues*, as well as a lecture by the play's author, Eve Ensler. Such events have Catholics wondering about the correct interpretation of academic freedom at one of the nation's top Catholic universities. The Queer Film Festival was launched last year by then-senior film major Liam Dacey. He explained in a phone interview that he planned this year's festival from Philadelphia, with the help of Notre Dame junior Joanna Basile. He said academic departments endorsed the festival "as an academic event."

Sponsors of the event were the Gay and Lesbian Alumni of the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College; Notre Dame's gender studies program; its counseling center; and its departments of history, English, anthropology, and film, television and theater. Dacey said that the festival was a way to reach out to students and alumni who felt that the university had not been receptive to homosexuals in the past. "A lot of alumni feel disenfranchised by the university," said Dacey, who works as logistics coordinator for Philadelphia's Equality Forum, a non-profit organization that holds regional "gay pride" events. "We wanted to do an event at Notre Dame that the entire community could come enjoy. We wanted to provide an academic event where the marginalized alumni and students could come back, and that focused on filmmaking, tolerance, and acceptance."

Austen attended a screening of a film documenting a homosexual couple's same-sex union in the Episcopal Church after being denied marriage by the Catholic Church. The film was followed by a panel on "The Future of Gay Marriage" featuring Sister Gramick, who has refused a Vatican order to stop speaking on homosexuality. Austen left the event early. "No matter how much they want to deny it the event was celebrating homosexuality," said Austen. "The film was an obvious attack on the Catholic Church. Everyone was saying that the Church had to change its doctrine."

Bishop D'Arcy publicly voiced his concern that the festival conflicted with Church teachings. "This presentation is an abuse of academic freedom," said Bishop D'Arcy in his statement. "Freedom is always linked to truth. In this seminar, held at a Catholic university, there is no place given to the presentation of Catholic teaching on the matter of homosexuality. The rights of others are violated." Both the festival's organizer and the university itself disagreed with the bishop's statement. Dacey said organizers tried to have someone from the Church speak, "but everyone we contacted declined to participate. Notre Dame's official, statement said that while it takes what the bishop says seriously, "on this point we differ in his interpretation of academic freedom." The statement further said, "Within reason, we would prefer that our students encounter the secular American culture, with all its faults, in the context of their Catholic education rather than attempting to cloister them till the time they graduate, only then to confront reality."

"The Queer Film Festival is an examination of a certain genre of film," said Matthew Storin, associate vice president for news and information. At Notre Dame, "it does not constitute an endorsement of the behaviors that might be included in the content of the films." Austen disagreed. "The university is misled in thinking that this is just a festival showing what a certain genre of film is and exposing it to students," she said. "Those who run the festival have a specific agenda, which is to accept a certain life-style and

gay 'marriage.' There is hatred being expressed toward the Church in this festival." "We're not promoting an agenda at all," Dacey countered. "This is about Jesus' message of tolerance and acceptance.

Divided Campus

Bishop D'Arcy also weighed in on the university's performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, a play sponsored by V-Day, a non-profit organization concerned with violence against women. Hundreds of colleges, including many Catholic ones, stage performances on or near St. Valentine's Day as a fundraiser for anti-violence organizations, non-profit groups and women's shelters. "This play violates the truth about women; the truth about sexuality; the truth about male and female; and the truth about the human body. It is in opposition to the highest understanding of academic freedom. For freedom which is not linked to truth is soon extinguished," Bishop D'Arcy said in another, separate statement.

The Cardinal Newman Society recently issued a statement signed by 25 Catholic women who castigated the play for its "emphasis on genital anatomy and sexual activity, including lesbian encounters and masturbation." The statement said it "degrades women and fails to appreciate their true dignity and vocation." Austen said that the atmosphere on campus was divided. "The culture at Notre Dame is not one that respects the bishop's authority," she said. "To have departments being taken over by non-Catholic professors is not a good thing. The Catholic position is laughed at.

"Academic freedom is designed to protect faculty members in their research and teaching," said Patrick Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society. "Both the film festival and *The Vagina Monologues* are forms of entertainment with no academic value. "Only days after Paul Shanley was convicted in Boston for molesting boys in homosexual encounters, Our Lady's university is presenting a play that enthusiastically endorses such behavior among lesbian women," said Reilly. "Catholics ought to be appalled at this."

While some students were appalled, others found positive alternatives to the offerings. According to Austen, two Notre Dame students — Christina Dehan and Anna-Maria Scaperlanda-Ruiz — organized "The Maria Goretti Project: Empowering Women to End Violence." The four-night program featured five presentations. The events took place during the last week of January, prior to the performance of *The Vagina Monologues*. Dave Griffith, a 1998 graduate of Notre Dame, said that in protest to the Queer Film Festival another group of students decided to take a different approach. They offered an alternative motion picture event on campus — a John Wayne Film Festival.

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