

Wild and crazy guy banned in La Grande

Jim Fisher

Monday, March 9, 2009

Who in these parts would ever have suspected the not-so-distant community of La Grande, Ore., would be so infected with fear?

When some residents complained about a play scheduled to be performed at the high school, not only did the school superintendent, backed by the school board, ban the performance, but the president of the public university in town tried to keep it off her campus as well.

Yes, a university president decided that a play considered unfit for a high school was also unfit for a university.

And who is the playwright whose work so scandalized small minds in La Grande?

Steve Martin. Yes, he of the arrow through the head and the "wild and crazy guys" of the golden era of "Saturday Night Live."

The play, "Picasso at the Lapin Agile," sounds like mighty objectionable stuff. It centers on a chance, and fictional, 1904 meeting of Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein at a Paris bar. Neither has yet produced the work that makes him famous, and both jostle with each other, and others at the bar, about the nature of truth and beauty.

In 1995, Jeremy Gerard's review of the play for Variety said it "has the virtues, seldom seen these days, of an old-fashioned matinee comedy: There are plenty of laughs, a little romance, a little nostalgia - and it makes the audience feel smart. Nice trick."

But as the Associated Press report about the reaction in La Grande pointed out, it also "has references to sex and drinking."

Yikes, in a bar? In France?

Those references apparently caused one parent of a La Grande High student to complain and 137 people to sign a petition objecting to the play. Superintendent Larry Glaze canceled the performance planned by students and teacher Kevin Cahill, and the community's school board upheld his decision by a 4-3 vote.

At that point, the merely tiresome turned weird. Eastern Oregon University's interim president, Dixie Lund, blocked an attempt to move the performance to her school. At least she did until a member of the school's faculty told her the campus Student Democrats wanted to sponsor the play's performances.

Lund then said she had no choice, explaining, "As a public institution, we must abide by a nondiscrimination policy, which permits rental of campus facilities by outside groups or clubs."

What a shame. A school of higher learning is forced to permit an on-stage discussion of 20th century genius. It makes you wonder to what Eastern Oregon University will next have to open its doors: enlightenment, perhaps? - J.F.