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**"Sister Mary," the Archdiocese and freedom of expression; Nicholas Dolan: 40 years ago, a stage play tested free speech limits in St. Louis. It's back.**

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In Missouri, free expression - literary, theatrical, political - is under threat. Books are being banned from schools by the hundreds. Drag shows on public property are being threatened with legal bans. And supporters of Palestinian rights are being smeared by senators-one in particular-as mindless terrorist sympathizers.

In the present repressive climate, it is important to remember that none of this is new. This year marks the 30th anniversary of a fight within St. Louis over freedom of literary, theatrical, and political expression.

In one corner was a scrappy theater company that staged its productions for a period in downtown Union Station. In the other corner was one of the wealthiest institutions on earth: the Catholic Church. The object of their dispute was the theater troupe's staging of an irreverent play about a deranged nun - a play that, three decades later, is making a triumphant return to the St. Louis stage.

The play, Christopher Durang's 1979 one-act "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All for You," is about a surprise reunion between longtime Catholic educator Sister Mary and four of her adult former students.

Avoiding spoilers, the reunion takes a series of dramatic turns. The tone throughout is mischievous. Serious questions are raised about the logistics of the Virgin Birth (which is not to be confused, playgoers will learn, with the Immaculate Conception). In the play's most gonzo moment, a doll representing the infant Jesus is protractedly nailed to a proportionately small cross.

The play was to be staged in 1983 by St. Louis' Theater Project Company, co-founded by Christine Smith and Fontaine Syer in 1975. When the Catholic League, the famously pugilistic special-interest group, caught wind of this, it responded with both local and national outrage.

The St. Louis chapter president for the League voiced her objection to "the use of our tax money for a show that attacks a religion." The chairman of the League's national board of directors denounced the production. The Archbishop of St. Louis, John L. May, called for Catholics to boycott the play. And a state senator suggested that state funding for the Missouri Arts Council might be cut as punishment for the use of Council funds to stage the play.

Two things about this response to the play are worth noting. First, while it has become more common to note the Catholic Church's skewed priorities in light of its child sex abuse scandals, the point bears repeating in light of the period of the 1970's and 80's in particular.

According to the Archdiocese of St. Louis's own report on abuse, these two decades were the high-point of predation among the local clergy. In the 1970's, more than 30 clergy with substantiated allegations of abuse were active in the archdiocese. During this period, Archbishop May found time to moonlight as a theater critic, but was unable to cleanse his own ranks of abusers.

Second, the Sister Mary outcry is understandable as part of a broader wave of conservative panic in the 1980s about boundary-pushing art that received direct or indirect funding from the [National Endowment for the Arts](#). The most well-remembered uproars from this period were about the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, which graphically depicted gay male sex, and a photograph by the self-described Catholic Andres Serrano, entitled "Piss Christ."

Attacking these and other works became a cause célèbre for social conservatives, most famously the noxious Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and was linked to conservative polemics about the amoral decadence of the academic humanities.

These events are a rhyming precedent of the current wave of panic about art and academia, this time targeting queer-friendly YA novels, trans expression, and the intellectual work of so-called "postmodern neo-Marxists."

The pressure tactics took their toll back then. Speaking retrospectively, Syer said the Company lost out on patron funding and even a real estate deal because of the public controversy. University police moved personnel around to increase their presence at performances. But despite the obstacles and tensions, the show went on, performing to a string of full houses at the 700-seat Edison Theater. The Theater Project Company continued staging productions until 1991.

The play's local history of perseverance in spite of clerical intimidation makes it all the more exciting that thirty years later, St. Louisans can see Sister Mary onstage again. Stray Dog Theatre[<https://www.straydogtheatre.org/2023-season>] - a local production company which celebrates its own 20th anniversary this year - is staging the play until Dec. 16.

In an unsubtle irony, the venue is Tower Grove Abbey, a beautiful church dating to the early 20th century. I went to see it recently with my in-the-know, theater-loving friend. We loved it. It's funny and moving, brilliantly acted and smoothly staged - a wonderful bulwark against the culture of book bans, humorlessness, and sexual repression.

See the play. And savor your right and ability to do so, unimpeded by state or religious censors. Then, when you leave the theater, find ways of fighting to keep it that way.

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