

Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*

The theater and its corporate sponsors

David Walsh
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The announcement by the Manhattan Theater Club in New York that it has reversed its previous decision to cancel a production of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* and will stage the play next year as planned is certainly welcome.

A furor erupted after the appearance May 1 of an article in the *New York Post*, a right-wing tabloid, headlined, "Gay Jesus May Star on B'Way." The article claimed that the play featured a Jesus-like figure "who has sex with his apostles." The play, in fact, is about a group of 13 gay men who gather to celebrate the passion of Christ. The characters draw lots to determine their parts in the celebration.

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, on the basis of the *Post* article, declared that McNally's play was insulting to Christians and promised to "wage a war" against any effort to produce it. A group calling itself the "National Security Movement of America" made telephone threats against the "Jew guilty homosexual Terrence McNally." The message went on, "Because of you we will exterminate every member of the theater and burn the place to the ground." In the face of the attacks, Trans World Airlines, one of the corporate sponsors of the MTC, withdrew its financial support.

On May 21 the Manhattan Theater Club announced that it was canceling its production of the play, scheduled for the fall season, "because of security problems that have arisen around the production of the play and related concerns." The decision elicited a storm of criticism from playwrights and theater figures. Athol Fugard, the well-known South African playwright, withdrew his play *The Captain's Tiger* from the theater's line-up in protest.

Asserting that after consultation with the New York City Police Department it now had "the reasonable

assurances we need to produce this play responsibly and safely," the MTC announced its change of heart May 28.

Thirty prominent figures in the American theater, including Arthur Miller, Stephen Sondheim, Tony Kushner and A.R. Gurney—all of whom had protested the cancellation of the play—put their names on a statement congratulating the MTC. They called the decision to go ahead with McNally's piece, "a brave and honorable decision, unquestionably difficult to make." Fugard said in a statement, "I have boundless admiration for [MTC artistic director] Lynne Meadow's courage and would be absolutely delighted to bring back my play."

The decision to go ahead with the play is a small victory over the forces of bigotry and reaction, but it hardly resolves the disturbing issues raised by the incident. Claims by MTC officials that they had decided to cancel the play only because of security concerns were more than a little disingenuous. The play was not scheduled to be performed for some months. They hurried to announce its cancellation apparently before police had made their "threat assessment" and initiated a "responsive" investigation, which was cited May 28 as the reason for going ahead with the piece. In any event, McNally, against whom most of the threats were made, never wavered in his decision to continue with the scheduled production.

Concerns for their theater and its audience members are certainly legitimate, but one cannot help suspecting the TWA announcement, raising the possibility of a serious hemorrhaging of corporate financial support, contributed significantly to the MTC officials' May 21 decision.

This thought has occurred to other people as well. The *New York Times* quoted Jim Nicola, artistic

director of the New York Theater Workshop, in a June 4 article. Nicola said, “Funding for the arts is becoming more and more difficult for those out there chasing money.... There’s very little fortitude among the funders for any scent of scandal or controversy. The interesting thing to me about *Corpus Christi* was TWA’s withdrawal of its support.... What this really showed was that if we’re going to proceed, we need partnerships and funders with courage and reliability, and that’s getting harder and harder to find.”

The decade of the 1990s has seen the “nonprofit arts,” according to the National Endowment for the Arts, “hit with a ‘triple whammy’ ... with cutbacks in funding at the federal, state, and local levels.” In carrying out and justifying the cuts, the politicians asserted that the “private sector” would take up the slack. Despite record profits and a soaring stock market, it has not. Corporate and individual executive interest in serious, challenging art is at an all-time low. The present business culture is self-consciously, even proudly philistine. A Van Gogh may be prized as an investment and the opera or symphony attended as a social ritual, but most of today’s Wall Street types are instinctively hostile to anything that might encourage, even indirectly, critical thought and protest.

The current American theater, of course, is not in much danger of courting the wrath of the wealthy or even exciting much anxiety on their part—it is, by and large, a thoroughly tame animal. Broadway, the commercial theater, is today dominated by large-scale spectacles designed to attract tourist dollars. The majority of this year’s Tony Awards, the New York theater world’s equivalent of the Academy Awards, were handed out to revivals (*Cabaret* and *A View From the Bridge*), a musical based on a cartoon (Disney’s *The Lion King*) and a musical based on a film based on a novel (*Ragtime*).

Off-Broadway, in which category the Manhattan Theater Club belongs, has taken the place of mainstream Broadway theater of another era, only it doesn’t have the playwrights or the productions. The alternative theater or performance art available Off-Off-Broadway is fairly toothless in its own fashion, specializing, for the most part, in self-absorbed work of little interest to anyone outside a small incestuous world of performers, directors, writers and their immediate families.

The economics of theater operations and a decline in the size of the theater-going audience have forced Off-Broadway houses to rely on government and corporate beneficence. Ticket sales accounted for less than half of the MTC’s \$10 million budget in 1997, for example. It received \$250,000 from all government sources.

It is not entirely surprising, given the generally stagnant and retrograde state of the theater, to discover that very few of its leading figures seem concerned by the implications of becoming completely dependent on corporate generosity. If one has no intention of criticizing the present state of affairs, why should one even envision a clash with corporate boards and the danger of their withdrawing financial support?

But it must be clear to any thinking person that large companies will not look favorably on socially-critical work. More than that, as the *Corpus Christi* episode reveals, such entities will be made unhappy by theater works that rock the boat *in any fashion*. They have a natural, selfish predilection for the safe, the bland and the complacent. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and other right-wing forces rightly count on that.

Anyone interested in the development of serious stage work ought to recognize that dependence on big business sponsorship is inimical to free thinking, radicalism and experiment in the theater. This is an issue that is going to have to be addressed in the coming period.



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