May 8, 2017

To the Board of Directors of the Boston Children’s Theatre,

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), founded in 1974, is an alliance of over 50 national nonprofit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups dedicated to promoting the right to free speech. We write to express our concern over some Board members’ actions with regard to a brief scene containing nudity in the production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in late April. Burgess Clark, BCT’s longstanding Artistic Director, refused to remove the scene. The Board suspended him temporarily, pending a meeting.

It is our understanding that Clark chose to produce *Cuckoo’s Nest* because it is widely read at the high school level in the Boston Public Schools. Clark has been the Artistic Director at BCT for nine years and has never been obliged to submit his creative decisions to the board for approval, and contractually he retains full artistic control of the productions at BCT. Also, we are aware that the theatre has presented many boundary-pushing plays in the past including a gay-positive story that features a kiss between two men.

Clark ensured that ample warnings were given about the play containing nudity, adult language and themes. The play was a success at the box office as well as critically, and there were no complaints from students, parents, audiences or critics. The only complaints came from two Board members who took issue with the nudity in the context of a children’s theater.

Children see artistic representations of nudes in every museum, as well as in public spaces. The nude has historically been one of the central subjects of art and the beauty of the human body has inspired painters, photographers, sculptors and choreographers for many centuries. For hundreds of years there have been sculptures of nudes in many public spaces from Washington, D.C. to the capitals of Europe. Adults, possibly shamed about their own thoughts and fantasies, may occasionally be embarrassed, but if anyone...
can look at a nude and not see an issue, it is a child. Nevertheless, there are frequent calls to censor artwork containing nudity so as to “protect children” from what some claim is “indecent,” or simply to avoid controversy.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court has stated multiple times that simple nudity (i.e., representations of the nude body in a non-sexualized manner) is constitutionally protected expression. Schad v. Mount Ephraim (1981), Jenkins v. Georgia (1974), Osborne v. Ohio (1990).

BCT is the oldest children’s Theatre in the country and the oldest theatre in New England. It has a long legacy, and it would be a shame to see it impose a misplaced sense of “morality” and “decency” on the entire community. We urge you to re-instate its Artistic Director so that he can continue to produce plays with creative rigor and not bend to the moral beliefs and values of a few members of the community at the expense of presenting artistically valuable work.

NCAC has resources for cultural institutions that find themselves in the position where they need to negotiate controversy. Some of these resources can be found on our online resource, Artist Rights: http://www.artistrights.info

Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Svetlana Mintcheva
Director of Programs
National Coalition Against Censorship