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Kegerreis on Equus

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KEGERREIS ON EQUUS

BASSETT: I wonder if, in retrospect, you can tell me how the Equus controversy affected you and how it affected the university.

KEGERREIS: Well, I think the controversy had a negative impact on the University. That is to say, I'm speaking in external terms here, I think anytime you have an issue arise, in which it is very simple to condemn the University and very complicated to explain the way the University looks at that issue. Given the historic and philosophical underpinnings for the University's position, you are almost bound to lose in the arena of mass communications. If you have, for instance, an editorial writer who delights in tweaking institutional noses, they have an almost pathetically simple task in order to make the the University look akward, or almost silly.

I think that in internal terms, it almost strengths the University. It recalls us, as we talk about these things, some of the reasons why there is a University, why society created a University to being with. And so to have us tested every once in a while, on the basis of free speech, or academic freedom, the right of free assembly, all those great and important 200-year old precepts that we have embodied, I think, for the more conspicuously, more self-consciously, in University life than any other institution in the country. I think being challenged on those grounds every once in a while is good for us. So I am not trying to be terribly theoretically or abstract about this, but you asked a question, and I think it probably had a net negative impact on us in terms of externals but have probably strengthened internally.

BASSETT: You don't subscribe to that old show business adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity?

KEGERREIS: I don't subscribe to that, no. No, the business about spelling your name right and that is all you care about. That might be true for an entertainer, or performer, or particularly a writer. Maybe not an entertainer but a writer who certainly needs name recognition. That almost at any other cost. The idea should we do anything different, heavens no, The idea of forcing the Theatre department to bring to us all the titles they are considering, and for the administration to adopt the rule of a censor---pouring over the scripts to make sure there isn't an single inflammatory word or phrase or idea in them would be so contrary to what the institution ought to be about that I can't imagine considering it. I don't probably though, one of the things we, that I did, I won't say we, was were to happen again, I would take more care maybe. We may have given the idea, we may somehow by our actions or by responses, we may have conveyed the idea we were conveyed the notion we were just a bit snobbish, just a bit disdainful of people who were claiming we were pornographers, or child molesters, or some of the awful things they said in the careless treatments of us. We were so critical of their comments that we may have appeared to appear to be a little pompous.

BASSETT: Well, we never issued any sort of formal statement of response, at least that I am aware of.

KEGERREIS: Well, I wrote to everyone who actually signed their name to a communication, telling them a paragraph or two, why we are not going to quash the play or

punish the perpetrators. And why we thought the play was a good one and why we thought it was within our purview to have this presentation on the campus. But I heard later that some of the onlookers thought that we did not treat these people (the letter writers) with enough respect. And that may have been, that notion may have unconsciously come thought because I was so aggrieved, so annoyed, so injured, by some of the comments that it was hard to treat the writers with respect. Because they took the liberty of saying the most outlandish things without reading the play, without ever seeing the play, or the performance, or reading criticisms of the play. The idea that someone can lash out in the most extravagant manner, at you without doing any research whatsoever to bolster their position, creates, particularly in a scholar, or a teacher, or a University administrator creates sort of the notion that comes through in some of the comments I made. Or maybe the comments the University made in response to the reporters. And to the extent you try to humiliate a critic, you lose that war too, because you are returning an unacceptable comments in trade for an unacceptable comment and the University ought to be more statesmanlike, probably. But I hope we didn't abuse people unnecessarily, but there was a tone, perhaps, I tried, in the more recent, roughly, similar example with the material that doesn't compare, of course, mainly, the blue movie that the student affairs group finally decided should not be quashed. Try there to responds more temperately to the people who were ringing their hands who were crying about the fall of western civilization through the vehicle of Wright State. But part of my personal problem is I have a well developed sense of the absurd...sense of humor is a related condition...sometimes plagued with the unavoidable, unquenchable impulse to be flip. The more outrageous the comment, the more likely I am not to treat it seriously. To be serious about some of things the University is to go insane in short order. That's a long winded answer.

BASSETT: How does this controversy, which probably existed more strongly for you than for me, because I didn't receive that many comments, compare to other controversies of the last decade, or even the last two decades? Is this in your view a more serious or less serious event?

KEGERREIS: No. I don't---I've always been intrigued with words, and I am hung up on the word serious---no this was not a life threatening event. It was not, for instance, as significant as the enormous power arrayed against us when we were trying to establish a medical school. That was an honest-to-god fundamental test of the institution. In this case, however, this really was an attack on University's in general. We had lots of power we could have called on, had it been necessary. Because Equus was being shown at other University's in the same season and had been for nine prior seasons, and we could have rallied all the forces that come to play in a first amendment situation and academic freedom, had it been necessary. I never truly felt institutionally threatened although we had legislators who wanted to dismember us. But it was so serious. Is it serious in a life threatening way to the institution? Would it reduce our appropriation? Well there was a measure introduced on the Senate floor that said our funds would be cut off if we didn't shape up. But nobody could conceivably take that seriously.

The other thing that made it less serious than it might have been was the character of the principal antagonists. Now, I choose character carefully; I don't mean they were loose or bad character, but they were easily identified as members of a particular religious and moral conviction, and every additional communication we received had the same repetitious phrasing,

easily identified as a , as the current self appointed defenders of public morality, and connected prominently to specifically, for lack of a better word, fundamentalist, that's not an accurate term, but its used in the media, super-fundamentalist doctrinal background. Now had these complaints about us come from Pulitzer prize winning authors, from heavy weight commentators on the scene, conservative or liberal, had it come from other Universities, from the Chancellor, come from our own academic leaders in the University, that would have indicated we were in quotation marks serious trouble. Part of the reason why it was not a serious attack on us, as some of our other institution challenges through the years, was that it was isolated, relatively confined, to an identifiable kind of grouping. One of the reasons you didn't receive all those communications, is that I am a lighting rod. Somebody kicks somebody else in the shins and they write a letters to me. That's part of my job.

BASSETT: The Board invited me in and I met with them and their attitude seemed to be supportive.

KEGERREIS: Yes, I was there. Yes, they were supportive, but, prior to your appearance, and afterwards, there was a sort of rueful hope on the part of a couple of trustees, why do we need this kind of trouble. For instance, with all of the thousands of plays to choose from, why do we choose a play that is going to inflame anybody. Why can't we be content to produce very challenging, interesting, complex plays , without choosing one that's going to annoy people who see this as an unnecessary kind of exhibition. So trustees in general, and administrators, I hope, to a lesser extent, like things to go along smoothly, unruffled, and not have trouble. But, no, the trustees discussed this matter more thoroughly perhaps than the typical member of the campus

community realized. Both Mick and I delivered lengthy explanations of the issues. We sent letters to the trustees and tried to bring them into an understanding of the way the University looks at these things as best we could, and as a result they were supportive. But as I say there were some group of us...there as well. I suppose a final element in my weighing of the seriousness of all of this was that in the most fundamental way, I thought, and still do think that E was a marvelously crafted play. Just an absorbing drama and the kind of thing a good theatre department ought to tackle. So it isn't that I was neutral, I was positive. So that probably tempered the way I looked at it.

BASSETT: I heard there was a lot of pressure on the Board of Regents because of the Program Excellence program. At one point you called me and said the Board's staff was wavering, and that you were prepared to go to war with them if they should withdraw what looked at the time a certain award for the department and the University.

KEGERREIS: Yes, the Board of Regents had just launched the Program Excellence program in which the University had be invited to submitted applications for recognition. And of the half dozen applications we had sent in, the one from the Theatre department that we heard, sub rosa, that was likely to receive an award, and the only one in Uhip. We heard by the grape vine that some of the regents staff members, particularly and specifically those involved in public relations, were tremulously about giving an ward indicating academic excellence to a program that created this furur. That finally excited me. If the state headquarters for higher education decided to back down in the face of simple public controversy from its own standards and criterion, I was prepared to go to war with everything I could muster. I however had the

good sense to check into the situation and discovered that there were people who were nervous, but the Chancellor and no one else was inclined to tamper with the process. And then I talked, very carefully, very discreetly, with some of the people involved with in the selection process for the awards, (and I dare not name any names, because it was quite unconventional to intrude, but I though the circumstances deserved it) and they assured me they would ignore the publicity. And that is the way it turned out. There wasn't any hint of delaying or holding back or another of the tactics one would use if they were spineless. They just came forward, straight forwardly, with the award at the proper time, along with the other awards that went to other programs around the state. We had an acting Chancellor at the time, and here was a fellow who was a candidate for the full-time job, who eventually got, it, who was trying to work out new, more supportive relationships with the Governor, and we had a Governor who had other controversies to deal with, and neither one of them, at least in their written communications, never wavered at all. So that was helpful.

BASSETT: I met the Chancellor Coulter at the awards ceremony and I thought he was most supportive.

KEGERREIS: Yes. I didn't assist him, in any way, to write his letter to the critics. He used the same letter over and over again, and I thought it was near perfect. He indicated it was the University's decision what to do and the Regents wouldn't dream of interfering, and mentioned in passing that the play had won awards and was presumed to be virtually a standard.

BASSETT: I was not aware of any criticism within the University from faculty or staff.

KEGERREIS: I'm trying to think about that. I don't believe there was any, even from our own public relations people. There, in the latter group, was more interest in trying to explain as thoroughly, as clearly as possible what our position was rather than ringing their hands over the thing. Incidentally, one of the letter writers, I recall, said something that did cause me to wonder. I think it was a woman who demanded to know why the police hadn't raided the theatre. It caused me to wonder if a private citizen could lodge a complaint and have the police to come in or observe the play and make a determination. I don't know if that has ever been tested.

BASSETT: As a matter of fact, that happened a couple of years ago in play called BENT at Fort Wayne. The city has on its books a pornography ordinance which were used to get the sheriff or police to come see the play under threat to close it down.

KEGERREIS: Well, the reason I paused when I read that, was that would be unprecedented on our campus and what would our reaction be. We could not interfere with the lawful activity of the police, but we sure as the devil could sue, the next day, to seek an injunction to prevent the police from interfering with our lawful right to produce a play. That notion was novel and it stopped me in my thought train rather abruptly when I read that.

BASSETT: Wade Jackson has written another letter, his fourth, a week ago, virtually the same letter....

KEGERREIS: There is no denying that newspapers love controversy so dearly that don't care what the content of the argument is, just so it is controversy. They love the badminton game. ... They seldom pause to take stock of the weight of the issue in their rush to keep the issue alive. That's their business. I used to do battle and rail at them, but am much more effective by not doing so. Whenever you lose your temper with the press it is cause for an extra drink on the house.

BASSETT: (Recalls the Guardian's publication of a streaker with a Nixon mask.)

KEGERREIS: ...This EQUUS thing, though, I wish we had time to do, was to see how the performance was treated at the other Universities. I understood that Cincinnati had had some problems with it, but they may have used a body stocking or something on the female performer in that scene. And I think Bowling Green should play in the same season, but I never really had time to follow up to discover whether the production was completely faithful to the original or if it had been doctored, and so what the local reaction was. Wade Jackson, you know all it takes is one person to embark on this mission, and it was obviously crafted by one person.

(Pause for a telephone conversation.)

...By the way, that's another flap on this EQUUS thing. If people in my own denomination, I'm a Methodist, had lacerated me for being connected with such an obviously unprincipled exhibition that would have startled me..It wouldn't have changed my mind, but it would have

been very hard for me to handle. Not a single person gave me anything but sympathy. I don't know how your article you are going to write, what focus it will have, certainly one of the focus would be free speech and all that stuff and the quality of the play and the fact that those who are simply offended by simple nudity could hardly find a place where it was more natural or more an embedded part of the story or an explanation or a psychological problems of the chief characters than in this play, but on the other hand, another focus might be this individual. Wade Jackson ought to be a fascinating study.

BASSETT: I thought about trying to meet him to interview him. I am curious as to what he really thinks. Now, his theme doesn't even seem to be this University anymore, it almost seems to be (Governor) Celeste.

KEGERREIS: I think it is simple cleverness. Tackling the University- tackling an institution, is far less emotionally productive than tackling a person. You can think about a person being evil, you can develop an animosity, you can develop a sufficient flow of emotion that you are willing to do something. But if I were to attack the Bank of America or the University of Chicago from a distance, I don't get worked up the way I do may be if I attack Nixon or Celeste or Kegerreis. So he, Wade Jackson, has always used individuals. He has never said the University Community of 2000 people is rotten. He has said Kegerreis is rotten and ought to be removed from office. And so on.

BASSETT: He makes the same recommendation for myself.

KEGERREIS: Yes, we would go out together.

BASSETT: Maybe you could put this controversy to end is to say you are giving up the Presidency (of the University) because you wanted to satisfy Wade Jackson.

KEGERREIS: You know I thought about that. I would not have retired if this has till be going on. The idea that I was under pressure would have been repugnant.

BASSETT: A corollary is that from my own faculty they feel that now this is over, you can't avoid a controversial play in the future.

KEGERREIS: I suppose that is a natural temptation, but I don't think you want to top it.

BASSETT: Uptop it.

KEGERREIS: The only safe way is to continue to look at plays in the same way you always have. I, ... You and I did chuckle over the fact that next in the sequence of plays is about as red, white, and blue and super safe that you could have choose if you had spent a year choosing a play, and of course it was accidental.

BASSETT: You did see Amadeus the play and the movie. You know that is the play author as EQUUS. Really it is the same story when you come to think about it. The central character is a man in mid-life crisis who has a relationship with a younger man, who is an

aberration, in the one case, a sickness, and the case, a tainted genius. There are a lot of similarities in those two plays.

KEGERREIS: I regret to say I hadn't thought of that.

BASSETT: It is pseudo-religious, in some ways, art purists, music purists were upset over the portrayal of Mozart. Mozart is portrayed in a very crass way. Bile functions.

KEGERREIS: Crude. Yes. But the difference is he used recognizable names. As a vehicle for the drama whereas in EQUUS they are all relatively anonymous people until their character is developed. You are expecting Mozart to write music. But people who are far more versed in music than say that Mozart was an enormously compulsively writer, composer, and it was just a matter of his finding time for him to put down on paper what was in his head. His head was jammed with scores. And he never really had to sit down and say I've got to write an opera or something. He only had to find time to sit down and write.

BASSETT: The movie made me feel I had been put in touch with a genius.

KEGERREIS: Yes, there is a difference in the movie between a genius composer and an average or good composer. That was portrayed very well. The scene...

BASSETT: ...on the death bed

KEGERREIS: ...yes and the first one what he first met the Emperor, and Saliere had composed a piece, intending to humble Mozart, but instead, Mozart on the spot, changed the music and humbled Saliere.

BASSETT: and used the teme in Figaro

KEGERREIS: I enjoyed it a lot, but I confess I learned something today.

BASSETT: Royal Hunt of the Sun has a similar theme. A younger man supplants an older man.

KEGERREIS: ...conversation I had with the most strident woman, and that was one of the times, when I think it was fair to say, that I conveyed in reporting about that, I wanted to give people a flavor of the comments, and frankly I didn't want the recipients of my explanation to understand where the woman was coming from. The reason I could be criticized for that was it was too easy to make the woman look ridiculous.. I felt a little bit having led her to make statements to which she made without any coercion at all, but made her look a little silly. The description she made about being in an art museum, with her husband, and rounding a corner and confronting a nude statue and just behind her was, what she described, was a newly married couple, and she was terribly embarrassed for them. And having no warning about confronting this nude statue of the man. Well, people who are affected that way, don't tend to influence many other people. I asked her how she viewed life classes. She said they were unnecessary. She had learned to paint without nude models. Well, I have to say that I did feel intellectually

superior to her and that is dangerous waters, whenever you start to deliberate make fun. Well I don't think I deliberately made fun, I was astounded at the things she said and she seemed eager to say them. I wasn't all that crafty. It just tumbled out. But the ensuing write up of what she said portrayed, a self-evident, a tortured hostility to anything remotely provocative that it was almost pathetic. And to have someone like that to influence University policy makes you wonder. But the Wade Jackson's of the world are able to use those people so easily; I could have used her. But I guess that is my over labored point there. Here was a person which such simplistic beliefs about things. The fundamentals have such easy solutions to everything. They don't view complexity. They don't see complexity in every day modern life. It is all cut and dry, black and white.

BASSETT: It is easy to be a theatre teacher and denigrate melodrama because he simplifies life. The good guy wins the bad loses. The world is complex.

KEGERREIS: In this woman there is someone you can sympathize with and even love, and want not to hurt. At the same time, viewing her analysis of issues as being hopelessly simplistic. It is the balancing of things, not hurting the person while demolishing the argument, is tricky. How do you do that?

BASSETT: Going back to that streaking incident. I was taken you with your attitude at the time. You felt very sorry for Nixon. You have a sympathy for the underdog.