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Conversation on Effects of Equus with Michael Ferrari, Provost

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BASSETT: How do you feel one year after the Equus controversy. Has it hurt the University?

FERRARI: I don’t think it has hurt the University at all. I think there are some, out there, who still carry some concerns that in this production we should not have permitted it to occur as it did. But the more typical and overwhelming attitude was that it was appropriate, well done; most people read it that way. We have had no responses from the public, whatsoever, for many many months. So I don’t really think it has hurt the University.

Being more of a local institute, I think we are more susceptible to these kids of concerns, like this movie the students are showing. On balance, I just don’t think it has.

BASSETT: Did you personally feel any pressure from faculty or members of the Board of Trustees. Did you receive Telephone calls or letters?
FERRARI: Some telephone calls, some letters. But not one from a Board member.

One of the things that was so encouraging about the reaction from the institution was the posture of the board. To be not only understanding but supportive. I think their role helped to screen out, block, whatever, and criticisms. We got no pressure from the Board to do anything. I would say that probably that this issue of whether we should have X-rated movies draws more important Board attention now in terms of. It does not have any redeeming value. Why are we doing this. Why are we permitting this to happen on campus.

BASSETT: That is because they see Equus as a work of art.

FERRARI: That’s right. And they saw that to the person. The other thing I’m sure had a lot to do with this is the reputation of the program, the department, the previous programs. There was no question in the minds of any of those board members, including one who was a clergyman, that the program represents a set of values, performances, etc. over time, of such nature that this was going to be a class act. And that in a totally class way. And so it was a non-issue. Your presentation to the trustees certainly helped and reinforced those concepts and attitudes.

BASSETT: I know of four colleges in Ohio who have done Equus since we have done it. Ashland, Lake Erie, Otterbien College.

FERRARI: Is that right.
BASSETT: Did you get letters from State Legislators?

FERRARI: About the time there was some movement in the legislature to introduce legislation. Their reactions, and it was just two or three people, were not in the least bit heave or serious. Fact was,...almost frivolous. Same thing from the Board of Regents but no political concerns of any sort, either on their own part, or ...reflecting their constituents. That somehow this was a very, very serious and inappropriate undertaking for a State University

BASSETT: As I recall the staff of the Board of Regents became nervous. It was at the time we were being considered for the Program Excellence Award.

FERRARI: Of course, all this was just timing. Had it occurred at a different time, it might not have come to anything. That the department was bening considered for an award simultaneously, is just incredibily coincidental. In all respects, the staff early on was very nervous because they had a suspicion that maybe this was going to affect the final judgement. Either/or there would be great political pressure brought to bear on them. As it finally turned out, and I sat on that committee for the Program Excellence, and the day the program was being considered, not only was I there, but the chancellor, John Millett, consultant to the committee, was there. I made some comments about the production, which were very much akin to what you had said to the board earlier. Millett
very quickly reinforced all those kids of things. And it was just from then on, there was unanimous reaction. This is one place we are going to hold the line and the Chancellor took that position so. Because it would have been much easier, I think, for anybody to cave in at that moment. And there are all kind of ways they could have made that happen without it looking as though it was a negative vote because of Equus. They cold have decided that there would not have been as many awards; Fortunately, we were so high up in the rankings of the twenty or twenty two that it would have been difficult, but they could have cut it off, for example, at some number and varied the amount of the award. there was nothing sacred about how much the grant was going to be for each one. And so there could have been ways, had the Board felt tremendous pressures to manipulate the process at the end to keep us out. I know we were in the ten to sixteen range. But it is conceivable they could have done that. they were going to give $200,000 awards, and award just ten. To select us independently would have been very difficult. But possibly there could have been some way to avoid it. But I will say that from the Chancellor, the Governor, after meeting the Governor, as well, I was pleased all the way through.

BASSETT: Did the Governor have anything to say about Equus.

FERRARI: I was there for the awards announcement. He was, he had just a big smile on his face. He said something about the awards, but he knows about the reputation of our department, and how pride it is for Ohio to have it.