

The Washington Times

The Washington Times - May 1, 1996

'Teach-In' Goes All-Out in Hailing Shakespeare *Shunned Bard Has Support on U.S. Campuses*

By Carol Innerst

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Using the bard's own words, actors, scholars and students at a 'teach-in' yesterday bashed colleges and universities for dropping Shakespeare and other great authors from college requirements.

A quick national poll of 22 institutions revealed that 13 English departments had dropped their "great authors" requirements, said Jerry L. Martin, president of the National Alumni Forum, which sponsored the "Teach-In on Shakespeare."

"That's the dumbing down of America," he said. "Shakespeare's out. What's in? Sex, politics, and popular culture."

The close-in target of the teach-in was Georgetown University, which currently requires English majors to take courses on two of the three great English writers -- Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton. Beginning with the class of 1999, English majors will not be required to study any of the three.

Students will be able to choose such elections as "Hard-boiled Detective Fiction," "AIDS and Representation," "History and Theory of Sexuality," and "Women, the Media and Revolution."

"Thou has most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm," said cultural commentator Michael Medved, quoting from "The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth" and referring to Georgetown.

"The timing is ironic, and even tragic," said Mr. Medved. "In Hollywood history, the hottest writer in Shakespeare. Six major Shakespearean films are on tap this year. They should require Shakespeare so, if nothing else, Georgetown students can understand Hollywood."

Shakespeare is full of the sex and violence that audiences crave, but the bard handles it better, he added.

Consumers of higher education ought to be upset over the national trend to shuck Shakespeare, Mr. Medved said. "College is expensive. It's outrageous to think someone would spend \$100,000 for a college education and be untouched by Shakespeare."

"The dangers to learning can be partly attributed to interdisciplinary studies, which guarantee certified incompetence in at least two fields," said former poet laureate Anthony Hecht, who taught in Georgetown's English department from 1986 to 1993. "Multiculturalism is a way of avoiding close inspection of a subject."

"We have an intransigent majority in the English department of 'tenured radicals' from the 60s," said Richard Alan Gordon, Georgetown law professor and alumnus. "They are digging in their heels."

Alma Walker, a high school English teacher from Pasadena, Md., said teachers will have a tougher time convincing students if the universities no longer require it.

The teach in at the Old Car Barn next to Georgetown's campus attracted 30 to 40 students, alumni, scholars and actors, including emery Battis and Helen Carey, currently performing at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, who have presentations from "Julius Caesar" and "The Tempest."

Even Queen Elizabeth I had something to say about the situation. "Excise Shakespeare from the curriculum? Stuff and nonsense!" trilled Mary Anne Jung, a member of Vpstart Crow Productions, a local Shakespearean company, who appeared in costume as the 16th century queen.

National figures who couldn't be on hand sent written messages of support.

Said actor Charlton Heston: "Eliminating the works of Shakespeare from academic requirements impoverishes the education of our students and marginalizes a shining artist whose penetrating insights are as timely today as they were four hundred years ago."

Nobel laureate Saul Bellow said: "You are right about the disastrous trend in English studies."

"One day the world will regret such confusion, but for now many English departments, like Georgetown's, are in the hands of the Lilliputians, careerists who can soberly tell us that 'The Tempest' and 'Gilligan's Island' are of equal worth," wrote Georgetown alumnus William Peter Blatty, author of "The Exorcist."