

3/17/2022

Dear Editor
and to the Grand Rapids Community:

The beauty of theatre, especially *community* theatre, is its nature to bring polarized people together for moments of enjoyment. From different backgrounds to different viewpoints, as cast and crew we set aside those differences and become a tight-knit family for 8-12 weeks, working countless volunteer hours together toward a common goal. At the culmination of a production, we take the ephemeral family we have created as a cast and we extend the welcome to the local audience, which shares in a moment of our mirth. I speak from personal experience that some of my closest colleagues on the stage should not be sharing a friendship with me by measurement of our politics, religion, or world views. We ought to be Capulets and Montagues clenched in opposition. Yet here we are as Romeos and Juliets, willing to die for the shared love we have of bringing joy on the stage. Recently our organization, Grand Rapids Players, made a difficult decision to cancel performances of *Sister Act* merely days before the curtain opened. The response has been widely polarized and highly emotional. It saddens me that rather than building community, our untimely decision has served only to make underlying divisions in our community more evident.

For points of clarity, I would like to make some things understood so that those who are angry, disappointed, or otherwise emotional can send their arrows in the right direction. Firstly, Grand Rapids Players is a separate organization from the Reif Arts Council. While we share a roof, contract their services, and in a small community we inevitably share some people, we are separate entities. With the exception of occasional past and future collaborations, RAC is not accountable for the decisions of Grand Rapids Players or vice versa. Secondly, whether you agree or disagree with our recent decision, Grand Rapids Players was not bullied into cancellation by any individual or organization. There were those who made our controversies known to us, but right or wrong, the decisions to start and to stop the production were our own.

We are a group of ever-changing individuals, and the related votes were greatly discussed, never unanimous. From the moment of conception to the moment of termination, a gradual series of events and revelations brought us to our untimely decision. Was our initial decision to move forward producing this play a mistake, or was the greater error in our last minute cancellation? Errors were made and no doubt each reader will have a strong opinion on what was done wrong. Hindsight is 20/20. We have a list of 'woulda, coulda, shoulda' that some critics might gladly share, and of that list we are well aware. This a painful lesson for our future improvement, and we can only hope to learn from it.

I am not here to take a personal stand either way on casting Deloris Van Cartier with a racially blind eye. With a few publisher-approved changes to the script it is allowed, and so the nature of the question is not a *can* but a *should*. I will not venture to answer that here, for I believe that is part of a larger, more complicated dialogue on race, roles, and casting. That is a dialogue Grand Rapids Players intends to facilitate in the future, and we hope it will be accepted constructively and respectfully. I extend sincere apologies to my friends, the dedicated cast and crew, and to all those who have been affected by this difficult decision. Whether or not you agree with the decision, I hope that you will respectfully engage in our future dialogue, and give us a chance to grow, improve, and continue building community for another 57 years and beyond. All I can do from here is ask for your forgiveness for our errors, and request your continued engagement to guide and strengthen our path forward.

Sincerely and Respectfully,
John Schroeder
President, Grand Rapids Players

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