

Student play about homosexuality marred by arson

(CPS) - Opening night of a Southwest Missouri State University production of a play about homosexuals and AIDS was marred by an arson fire that destroyed the home of a vocal student supporter of the drama.

Brad Evans, president of People Acting with Compassion and Tolerance, was attending a candlelight vigil outside the campus theater Nov. 15 shortly before the debut of "The Normal Heart" when the fire was reported. Two cats died.

Someone had forced open the back door of Evans' single-story house and spread flammable liquid on the floors of two rooms, investigators said.

They believe the fire was related to Evan's involvement in supporting the campus staging of "The Normal Heart," a play that chronicles the deadly spread of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) through the gay community.

When "The Normal Heart" opened in New York in 1985, some gay leaders worried the play, in portraying sick homosexuals, would make them look bad and embolden heterosexuals to scuttle gays' hard-won rights.

They accused playwright Larry Kramer, himself a gay activist, of betraying their cause.

When a campus theater group announced it would stage the work at Southwest Missouri in Springfield in mid-November, however, local heterosexuals charged the play glorified homosexuality.

During four weeks of controversy and threats by play opponents, who included state Rep. Jean Dixon and a group called Citizens Demanding Standards, called on SMSU President Marshall Gordon to halt the production.

Gordon refused, saying the

play would help make audience members more aware of AIDS and how it is spread.

Heated rallies and demonstrations for and against the production were held throughout the week before the play's Nov. 15 debut.

Citizens Demanding Standards leader Paul Summers called the play "obscene," a bad use of taxpayers' money and contrary to the moral standards of the Springfield community, which is a center of evangelical Christian groups and activities.

Summers drew about 1,200 people to a public rally to sing gospel songs and listen to fiery speeches denouncing the production.

Summers' group first tried to get the production canceled. When that didn't work, it lobbied for a "wholesome" AIDS play. Finally, three days before the play's debut, the group appointed itself watchdog, promising to try to uphold community morals when future questions arise.

"I've never, never seen anything like this," said Bob Bradley, head of SMSU's theater department, of the controversy.

The day before opening night, actress Tess Harper, a SMSU grad who starred in the drama, joined faculty members to blast opponents of the play. She accused them of lying and using smear tactics like those the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy used against his opponents in the early 1950s.

Campus health officials report the play - or at least the controversy around it - made more SMSU students aware of AIDS. The health center had more requests for AIDS information during the four weeks of debate about the play than it had during the preceding 12 months.

Musical alternatives in time for Christmas

by Rob Farnham
Collegian Staff Writer

Sure, this was the year of New Kids on the Block and Martika. Nonetheless, a number of good tunes showed up here and there in 1989. Several of what I feel were the most worthwhile, if not well-known, recordings of the year are described below.

Music fans (or those Christmas shopping for them) who've had all they can take of "classic rock" and tenuously musical, but very well marketed, teenage acts (would it be possible for those New Kids to be any less talented?) can look to these albums for alternatives.

"Disintegration" - The Cure. Group founder and creative force Robert Smith says that this may well be the Cure's last album. If that's the case, they're certainly going out in a big way. "Disintegration," an imposing and sometimes overwhelming album, runs to over 72 minutes, and with its associated bonus tracks and remixes (on three CD maxi-singles) exceeds two hours playing time.

A relentlessly downbeat suite of songs of loss and isolation makes up the bulk of the release, as the band reprises major themes

with melancholy orchestral structures made up of resonant synth chords and decaying, heavily signal-processed guitars. Smith sings with conviction the lyrics of such somber, brooding compositions as "Pictures of You" and the menacing "Prayers for Rain."

While the Cure may in fact be headed for disintegration, fans can at least be assured that this substantial work will survive the band's demise.

"New York" - Lou Reed. More than 20 years after laying the foundations of postmodern music with his first band, the Velvet Underground, Reed reaffirms his status as one of rock's great songwriters with this 14-song, 57-minute broadside.

Employing a basic two-guitar/bass/drums lineup, and making the most of his limited vocal range, Reed drives home his accounts of the downside of big-city life with simple, punchy riffs and pungent, angry lyrics. "Dirty Boulevard" and "Romeo Had Juliette" are stark, plaintive looks at underclass despair and degradation.

Loaded with vivid images of crushing poverty, street violence, and the stark inequities between rich and poor in our largest city,

"New York," though it occasionally falters on a throwaway track ("Sick of You"), is Reed's most powerful set of urban portraits in years.

"Oranges and Lemons" - XTC. This English trio made their first big noise on the charts this year, with "Mayor of Simpleton." Andrew Partridge's sweetly self-deprecating account of a none-too-bright romantic, and followed it up with Colin Moulding's quietly political "King for a Day."

The album largely rises to the standard set by the fine singles. "Oranges and Lemons" abounds in smart, eccentric musicianship and serves to demonstrate XTC's considerable stylistic range. They move freely from an acoustic shuffle to the electric techno-rock found in "Across This Antheap."

At the same time, the lyrics cover ground from the childlike delight of "Mayor" and Partridge's quirky tale of paternal pride, "Pink Thing," to the cutting, acid social commentary found in "Scarecrow People."

On "Oranges and Lemons," XTC successfully juggles naive sentiment and worldly cynicism. The resulting album, while it reaches no real conclusions, is certainly rewarding listening.



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