

Play About Iraq War Divides a Connecticut School

by CHRISTOPHER CAPOZZIELLO

WILTON, Conn. — Student productions at Wilton High School range from splashy musicals like last year's "West Side Story," performed in the state-of-the-art, \$10 million auditorium, to weightier works like Arthur Miller's "Crucible," on stage last fall in the school's smaller theater.

For the spring semester, students in the advanced theater class took on a bigger challenge: creating an original play about the war in Iraq. They compiled reflections of soldiers and others involved, including a heartbreaking letter from a 2005 Wilton High graduate killed in Iraq last September at age 19, and quickly found their largely sheltered lives somewhat transformed.

"In Wilton, most kids only care about Britney Spears shaving her head or Tyra Banks gaining weight," said Devon Fontaine, 16, a cast member. "What we wanted was to show kids what was going on overseas."

But even as 15 student actors were polishing the script and perfecting their accents for a planned April performance, the school principal last week canceled the play, titled "Voices in Conflict," citing questions of political balance and context.

The principal, Timothy H. Canty, who has tangled with students before over free speech, said in an interview he was worried the play might hurt Wilton families "who had lost loved ones or who had individuals serving as we speak," and that there was not enough classroom and rehearsal time to ensure it would provide "a legitimate instructional experience for our students."

"It would be easy to look at this case on first glance and decide this is a question of censorship or academic freedom," said Mr. Canty, who attended Wilton High himself in the 1970s and has been its principal for three years. "In some minds, I can see how they would react this way. But quite frankly, it's a false argument."

At least 10 students involved in the production, however, said that the principal had told them the material was too inflammatory, and that only someone who had actually served in the war could understand the experience. They said that Gabby Alessi-Friedlander, a Wilton junior whose brother is serving in Iraq, had complained about the play, and that the principal barred the class from performing it even after they changed the script to respond to concerns about balance.

"He told us the student body is unprepared to hear about the war from students, and we aren't prepared to answer questions from the audience and it wasn't our place to tell them what soldiers were thinking," said Sarah Anderson, a 17-year-old senior who planned to play the role of a military policewoman.

Bonnie Dickinson, who has been teaching theater at the school

for 13 years, said, "If I had just done 'Grease,' this would not be happening."

Frustration over the inelegant finale has quickly spread across campus and through Wilton, and has led to protest online through Facebook and other Web sites.

"To me, it was outrageous," said Jim Anderson, Sarah's father. "Here these kids are really trying to make a meaningful effort to educate, to illuminate their fellow students, and the administration, of all people, is shutting them down."

First Amendment lawyers said Mr. Canty had some leeway to limit speech that might be disruptive and to consider the educational merit of what goes on during the school day, when the play was scheduled to be performed. But thornier legal questions arise over students' contention that they were also thwarted from trying to stage the play at night before a limited audience, and discouraged from doing so even off-campus. Just this week, an Alaska public high school was defending itself before the United States Supreme Court for having suspended a student who unfurled a banner extolling drug use at an off-campus parade.

The scrap over "Voices in Conflict" is the latest in a series of free-speech squabbles at Wilton High, a school of 1,250 students that is consistently one of Connecticut's top performers and was the alma mater of Elizabeth Neuffer, the Boston Globe correspondent killed in Iraq in 2003.

The current issue of the student newspaper, The Forum, includes an article criticizing the administration for requiring that yearbook quotations come from well-known sources for fear of coded messages. After the Gay Straight Alliance wallpapered stairwells with posters a few years ago, the administration, citing public safety hazards, began insisting that all student posters be approved in advance.

Around the same time, the administration tried to ban bandanas because they could be associated with gangs, prompting hundreds of students to turn up wearing them until officials relented.

"Our school is all about censorship," said James Presson, 16, a member of the "Voices of Conflict" cast. "People don't talk about the things that matter."

After reading a book of first-person accounts of the war, Ms. Dickinson kicked off the spring semester — with the principal's blessing — by asking her advanced students if they were open to creating a play about Iraq. In an interview, the teacher said the objective was to showcase people close to the same age as the students who were "experiencing very different things in their daily lives and to stand in the shoes of those people and then present them by speaking their words exactly in front of an audience."

What emerged was a compilation of monologues taken from the book that impressed Ms. Dickinson. "In Conflict: Iraq War Veterans Speak Out on Duty, Loss and the Fight to Stay Alive"; a documentary, "The Ground Truth"; Web logs and other sources. The script consisted of the subjects' own words, though some license was taken with identity: Lt. Charles Anderson became "Charlene" because, as Seth Koproski, a senior, put it, "we had a lot of women" in the cast.

In March, students said, Gabby, the junior whose brother is serving in the Army in Iraq, said she wanted to join the production, and soon circulated drafts of the script to parents and others in town. A school administrator who is a Vietnam veteran also raised questions about the wisdom of letting students explore such sensitive issues, Mr. Canty said.

In response to concerns that the script was too antiwar, Ms. Dickinson reworked it with the help of an English teacher. The

revised version is more reflective and less angry, omitting graphic descriptions of killing, crude language and some things that reflect poorly on the Bush administration, like a comparison of how long it took various countries to get their troops bulletproof vests. A critical reference to Donald H. Rumsfeld, the former defense secretary, was cut, along with a line from Cpl. Sean Huze saying of soldiers: "Your purpose is to kill."

Seven characters were added, including Maj. Tammy Duckworth of the National Guard, a helicopter pilot who lost both legs and returned from the war to run for Congress last fall. The second version gives First Lt. Melissa Stockwell, who lost her left leg from the knee down, a new closing line: "But I'd go back. I wouldn't want to go back, but I would go."

On March 13, Mr. Canty met with the class. He told us "no matter what we do, it's not happening," said one of the students, Erin Clancy. That night, on a Facebook chat group called "Support the Troops in Iraq," a poster named GabriellaAF, who several students said was their classmate Gabby, posted a celebratory note saying, "We got the show canceled!!" (Reached by telephone, Gabby's mother, Barbara Alessi, said she had no knowledge of the play or her daughter's involvement in it.) In classrooms, teenage centers and at dinner tables around town, the drama students entertained the idea of staging the show at a local church, or perhaps al fresco just outside the school grounds. One possibility was Wilton Presbyterian Church.

"I would want to read the script before having it performed here, but from what I understand from the students who wrote it, they didn't have a political agenda," said the Rev. Jane Field, the church's youth minister.

Mr. Canty said he had never discouraged the students from continuing to work on the play on their own. But Ms. Dickinson said he told her "we may not do the play outside of the four walls of the classroom," adding, "I can't have anything to do with it because we're not allowed to perform the play and I have to stand behind my building principal."

Parents, even those who are critical of the decision, say the episode is out of character for a school system that is among the attractions of Wilton, a well-off town of 18,000 about an hour's drive from Manhattan.

"The sad thing was this thing was a missed opportunity for growth from a school that I really have tremendous regard for," said Emmalisa Lesica, whose son was in the play. Given the age of the performers and their peers who might have seen the show, she noted, "if we ended up in a further state of war, wouldn't they be the next ones drafted or who choose to go to war? Why wouldn't you let them know what this is about?"

The latest draft of the script opens with the words of Pvt. Nicholas Madaras, the Wilton graduate who died last September and whose memory the town plans to soon honor by naming a soccer field for him. In a letter he wrote to the local paper last May, Private Madaras said Baqubah, north of Baghdad, sometimes "feels like you are on another planet," and speaks wistfully about the life he left behind in Wilton.

"I never thought I'd ever say this, but I miss being in high school," he wrote. "High school is really the foundation for the rest of your life, whether teenagers want to believe it or not."

Private Madaras's parents said they had not read the play, and had no desire to meddle in a school matter. But his mother, Shalini Madaras, added, "We always like to think about him being part of us, and people talking about him, I think it's wonderful."