Phil Atlakson faced a dilemma. The Play Equus calls for a nude scene between a young man and a woman. Alan wants to make love to Jill, but he cannot. He is impotent because the god Equus is watching. The scene is sensual and tragic. Alan's sexual frustration drives him to blind horses, the horses he has worshipped as the god Equus.

The scene is integral to the play, but the nudity is also a potential bombshell.

Only a few months earlier, a privately produced play performed on the Boise State campus was found so offensive by Idaho State Representative Ron Slater (R-Boise) that he mounted a campaign against the play and its producer. Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, produced by the Idaho Shakespeare Festival at the Morrison Center, was an uncompromising parody of the Catholic Church.

Slater argued that the Shakespeare Festival should not be given public monies if it intended to produce material that denigrated a religion. Slater asked the Idaho Commission on the Arts to cease funding groups "who attack religious institutions or defame the sacred belief of our citizens or sponsor assaults on ethnic or racial groups." And he lobbied for rules to make certain that groups like the Idaho Shakespeare Festival would not receive public monies if they repeated Sister Mary Ignatius "or anything like it."

With that cloud hanging over the Boise arts community, Phil Atlakson — who was beginning his first semester as a professor of theatre arts at Boise State — began presenting his dilemma to others: "Can you do nudity at Boise State?" It had never been done before; that much was certain. Some students, he recalls, told him, "Go for it; they'll crucify you, but go for it." But then, Atlakson notes, he "started hearing the same voice: 'Yeah, it'd be great, but no, don't do it.'"

The final verdict by Atlakson: "I think total nudity is out. It would become so controversial it would become its own entity, it would overshadow the reason for having it." He would find some other way to "make that dramatic moment work."

Did that decision constitute censorship — albeit self-imposed? Should the university reflect and be responsive to the community standards? How does a publicly funded university function in a highly conservative city and state? Are professors afraid their art or their views will be considered obscene, offensive or radical? And to what extent do professors check themselves, hold back for fear of offending?

Different Perspectives

The concept of censorship and academic freedom within the university is perceived differently, depending upon the academic field.

Says Atlakson, "I think theater in regards to a lot of other arts is at a disadvantage. Theater is probably the most conservative of the arts." Unlike a book where the images are created in the individual's mind, or film, where the people and actions depicted are two-dimensional patterns of light displayed on a screen, theater involves real people directly in front of the audience.

"It's the thing that makes theater unique," says Atlakson. "It's a concentrated, immediate experience. Having someone undress on your TV set is far different than if someone is undressing five feet from you."

Theater is also unique in that it actively courts public attendance of its
productions.

It is not surprising then, to find the departments of English and art, for example, to be more liberal than the theater department about what sort of material is produced.

Nevertheless, there is a caution found among professors across the disciplines, a caution borne of concern that too liberal actions could bring repercussions — upon themselves and the university.

In the art department, faculty and students are free to produce work without interference, but students have been told that overly graphic drawings of nudes, for example, will probably not be displayed in the halls.

And despite the stereotypical image of wild-eyed professors spouting Marxism and radical politics, the economics and political science departments at Boise State are generally conservative, teaching traditional American philosophies. Marxist economics, when it is taught, is taught in the context of American capitalism.

Tom Trusky, founder of the BSU literary magazine cold-drip, defends stories and poems dealing with “adult themes,” and the use of four-letter words in BSU-sponsored literature.

“I think you have to be true to life,” he argues. “Art is a mirror. Art is not a mirror covered with smiley faced decals, dress shields or airwick deodorant sticks.”

But he too has held back at times, replacing a potentially controversial piece of literature with a milder one.

When something at the university does offend the public, it is BSU President John Keiser who hears about it first. Keiser believes “The major function of a university is to provide a forum of ideas,” and to ensure that forum “academic freedom has to be protected.” But, he adds, “It’s important to be aware of the taste of the community. We ought not to flaunt nudity in the art department, for example, or critical plays like Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, or socially questionable language. The key word is flaunt.”

But In Boise?

What occurs routinely on campuses in California or New York, might well cause an uproar in Boise.

Once again, Equus provides a case in point. Trish Elledge, an adjunct faculty member in the Theatre Arts Department recalls attending a production of Equus — with the nude scene included — at the University of California at Irvine. “There was no controversy about it at all,” she says. “Nothing in the campus paper, nothing in the community paper.” But in Boise? “I wouldn’t even pretend to bring something like that to Boise,” she said. “You have to play to your audience, and the audience is more conventional here, more easily offended.”

Atlakson believes he maintained the artistic integrity of the play despite the lack of total nudity. He considered this a technical problem: “It becomes the challenge of the artist to accomplish his goals without compromising.” Atlakson saw his goal in Equus as presenting the sensual scene between Alan and Jill while making clear that Alan is impotent — in a manner that does not offend the audience.

Shocking the audience, says Atlakson, would be counterproductive because the importance of the scene would be lost with the rising blood pressure of the viewers. Or as Keiser commented, “You end up talking about how much skin was exposed rather than what the message of Equus is.”

“This is not pornography,” Atlakson says. “We’re not exploiting anybody. We’re staging something that’s very tender. But you have to accept that there are some people who could not see it any other way than morally offensive.”

Even if only a minority of the audience
would be made uncomfortable with nudity. Atlakson defends his decision with the assertion that "I don't think theater can ever afford to be elitist. I don't like some of the trends in theater that excludes some of the audience."

Keiser has a more pragmatic view: "Why force a university administrator to get out and spend six weeks explaining one scene" to an offended community.

The bottom line, says Atlakson, is that "total nudity is beyond what people (in Boise) want to accept. I can live with that so long as I can make that moment work."

As is often the case in matters of controversial or potentially offensive art, the larger, more significant issues are all but ignored. The irony applies to Equus. "There's something much more explosive happening in the play," Atlakson says. "What we have here is a man who is questioning the cosmos. It becomes an assault on our modern thinking. It should be a controversy on all sides."

Challenging The Status Quo

Should the university reflect community standards?

"Oh the answer is 'yes' to meeting community standards," Trusky responds. "If you mean the international, transcultural academic community...I feel Boise State has an obligation to risk that peril of (exceeding) parochial standards because our job is to enlighten and inform...The function of the university is to provide a forum for different philosophies."

That sentiment is reflected by fellow English professor Lonnie Willis, who also teaches a course on censorship. "I think we should not be confined to the same community standards that probably exist in Idaho," states Willis. "If we are a university, we are a community of people who are open to ideas — a marketplace of ideas. I live on the basis of an atmosphere of freedom. I think generally we live with that given. That's not to say we're not realistic."

While Trusky has taken criticism for various works in the publications he oversees, he has also pulled back at times. "I censor myself, it's true," he says. "There's a great poem in last year's cold-drill by Dusty Rhodes — "In My Poor Dream Nancy Reagan Was A Caseworker." I would love to have used that poem on the Poetry In Public Places Series (posters featuring a poem for each month of the year) for November to coincide with the elections."

He explains that he likes the poems to correlate to the featured month. But, he notes, "I could see politicians making great hay of that particular poem and causing damage to the university."

Trusky says the poetry posters, which are sent to public schools and libraries free of charge, are sent with disclaimers that the individuals are to be their own censors — free to choose whether to display each poster or not. In that vein, Trusky notes, "I do pick one or two poems that I do think are quite provocative." Trusky rides that thin line between what is provocative and what might be considered antagonistic.

Obscene Today, Commonplace Tomorrow

What is provocative today may be commonplace tomorrow. An early 1970s issue of cold-drill included a short story containing the word "sperm," which attracted the attention, says Trusky, of "some local religious group." Trusky said the group obtained a copy of the story before publication and, with the offensive word marked, passed the story around, "as an illustration of the artistic filth that Boise State produced."

The administration received complaints about the yet to be published issue, but the university never asked Trusky to pull the offensive story. That issue of cold-drill went on to win first place for general excellence in the Rocky Mountain Collegiate Press Association. And, adds Trusky, "Today the word sperm is as common as 'french fry' in Idaho."

Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll

It was more than a predilection for offensive words that alarmed patrons of the BSU Pavilion in 1984 when the word got out that Ozzy Osbourne would perform in concert. It was the rock singer's reputation for performing bizarre acts on stage, including biting the heads off of bats.

After receiving a flood of phone calls from outraged Boiseans, Pavilion director Dexter King placed his own call to Osbourne's promoter. King said he told the promoter, "I'm not really sure we can bring that to town. I'm not sure we're ready for that." When the promoter threatened legal action, the Pavilion went ahead with the concert. Osbourne's bloodless performance went without a hitch, under the scrutiny of the Humane Society.

King says the Pavilion never intended to prevent the performer from appearing

Ozzy Osbourne

"If I want to teach Marxist economics, I must teach it in the context of capitalist economics." — Peter Lichtenstein.

Karl Marx

"If I want to teach Marxist economics, I must teach it in the context of capitalist economics." — Peter Lichtenstein.
in Boise. "There's no censorship that can go on in a state facility," he says. Any performer who can post the required bond and is willing to sign the necessary forms — including a promise to abide by the state's obscenity laws — has a legal right to rent the Pavilion.

Nevertheless, the Pavilion can become a focus of criticism, as it is often the only contact the public has with Boise State University.

BSU President Keiser was admonished by State Rep. Dieter Bayer (R-Boise), during the last legislative session for allowing "filthy" acts to perform in the Pavilion. Keiser responded that entertainers must sign a contract which says they agree not to violate the obscenity law.

**Questioning Ideas**

Often it is not lewdness or nudity that is the focus of censorship, but ideas. The latest attempt at controlling ideas on American universities, initiated by Accuracy in Academia, has apparently not come to Boise State. But it is indicative of the attitude that universities harbor radical, anti-American professors intent on brainwashing the minds of young students. Accuracy in Academia, a spin-off of Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media, announced last August that it would begin monitoring selected university classes around the country, "looking for political bias based on incorrect information," according to Malcolm Lawrence who heads the group. The *Washington Post* story that announced the campaign quoted Lawrence as saying the goal of Accuracy in Academia is to end Marxist "brainwashing" of young people through "misinformation and disinformation" in the classrooms.

**Marxist In Residence**

Peter Lichtenstein teaches Marxist economics at BSU. "Ten years ago I would have called myself a Marxist," he says. "Now I would call myself a democratic socialist."

Whatever the label, Lichtenstein disagrees with the concept of capitalism and the private ownership of factories and the resources that drive the economy. Just the kind of person Accuracy in Academia is out to monitor.

And he acknowledges being concerned about the group's efforts, "because my class would be the obvious target," he said. His fear with Accuracy in Academia, however, was that they would disrupt classes. As for his job security, he has no qualms about that. Lichtenstein holds tenure, and despite his unorthodox views of economics in America, he has earned the respect of his colleagues through his research, scholarship and teaching.

"My students have always appreciated the approach I've taken," says Lichtenstein. "I present a different philosophy, but I do it in such a way that a student is free to accept or disagree... It's mainly the people in the mainstream of social sciences who try to cram their ideas down people's throats."

And this last statement helps explain the paradox of his own academic freedom. "In a sense, yes, I have academic freedom," he says. "In another sense, no, I don't." The reason is that mainstream orthodoxy economic philosophy — capitalism — "Must be taught. There are some people who believe this is Truth," he says. Therefore, "If I want to teach Marxist economics, I must teach it in the context of capitalist economics. My own ideas must be squeezed in the framework of economic orthodoxy." This, he says, is typical in universities nationwide.

Lichtenstein, then, believes there is a basic indoctrination, a basic philosophy promoted on American campuses. But, he argues, the more liberal and radical ideas are actually at odds with that mainstream philosophy.

Traditional and relatively conservative schools of thought seem to escape the scrutiny that would be given more radical schools of thought. Promoting American democracy as an ideal, for example, would meet with no obstruction.

"There's general agreement on that," Willard Overgaard, political science chairman, notes. "It doesn't tend to be offensive to anyone... But to be an advocate of a Soviet type democracy would raise a different question."

Dr. Martin Seidenfeld, a Boise psychologist, was painted as naive and perhaps unpatriotic in the course of coordinating a special class at Boise State titled, "Nuclear Arms: The Issue of Our Times." Students attending the class heard professionals in various disciplines analyze the historical, psychological, economic, political, medical and theological aspects of the nuclear era. When announcements
for the class first went out, Seidenfeld said, "I was accused of exposing them (the students) to all this nonsense instead of the real facts."

He received a phone call from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences William Keppeler who had received complaints or inquiries about the controversial class, Seidenfeld recalls. "He wanted reassurance it wasn't going to be mere propaganda." Seidenfeld said. Given that reassurance, the class went on as planned, and the small tempest quieted.

A Matter of Taste

More often than not, censorship involved not philosophies but questions of taste. One man's art is another man's pornography.

Like the book Show Me. Head reference librarian Adrien Taylor says "Some people call it pornography, some call it sex education, some people consider it art."

The BSU library has it, plus a host of other books frequently targeted by conservative and religious groups. These groups often circulate a list of offensive books to their followers, with the advice that they call their local libraries to find out whether such "trash" is on the shelves.

Taylor has received numerous such calls. Often the books are not on the shelves at Boise State, but Taylor, playing along with their ruse, tells them he will certainly consider ordering the books if they want to read them.

Typically, those objecting to books at the library are people who do not use the library. And because "No one is forcing people to read books," Taylor says he cannot imagine a book that would be too offensive to be permitted on the shelves of Boise State.

"I ordered and read a book I considered offensive," says Taylor. It's Turner's Diaries, the neo-Nazi novel that was purportedly the manifesto for The Order. Taylor said he was repulsed by the book's fascist, anti-Semitic philosophy and its gruesome details of murder. But he notes, "People are interested in the Aryan Nations, and this book is important to the Aryan Nations. People have a right to have access to material about them. There's also future scholarly use."

It is this reason behind having the book at the university that is often missed by the university's critics. Eventually, how the surrounding community views the university is a matter of perception, and perception does not always equal reality.

The public does not necessarily understand the distinctions between study and advocacy, taken for granted by the faculty.

For example, a class designed to study a controversial subject can be misconstrued as a class bent on teaching — that is, advocating — that controversial subject.

BSU history professor Phoebe Lundy's class on witchcraft is a case in point. An academic examination of a prevalent cult in history and modern society has been frequently misconstrued as a class teaching witchcraft practices.

Similarly, Dr. Fred Mondin, a Boise psychotherapist who has taught the Human Sexuality course through the psychology department for the last ten years, receives his share of rumor-borne complaints. The complaints, he says, "Come from people who've never taken the class but have heard rumors about it . . . Most of the time those complaints are gross distortions, not only out of context, but not even near accurate."

Mondin notes "The subject of human sexuality is controversial because it relates to politics, religion, law." Mondin discusses the political issues of sex: abortion, teenage access to contraceptives, laws against oral sex ("So we're in there talking about oral sex as a stimulant"). Mondin has shown erotic movies. "They are not pornographic movies," he states. "They are produced for sexuality classes, but they are erotic and have lovemaking in them."

Mondin says he checked with the psychology department before presenting the film, and was given full approval. "I've had full support from the psychology department," he says. "I've always had the full support of the university — 100 percent."

And he notes the class is consistently rated high by the students and the class is consistently filled or overfilled. He also acknowledges that about one student out of 70 each semester will drop the class because he or she is uncomfortable with the material.

Marketplace of Ideas

This brings up the ever-present option of choice. In this or any university — this marketplace of ideas — there are bound to be some ideas that are offensive to some people. But the ideas and the art are available by choice only. They are not forced upon anyone.

While the university strives to be a good neighbor, its ultimate responsibility is to that larger community to which Tom Trusky alluded: "the international, trans-cultural, academic community."

As President Keiser noted, "Popularity is not our goal. Academic responsibility is."