

# 'Cuckoo's Nest' Production A Teen 'Learning Experience'

Last of 2-part series  
BY FATHER  
WILLIAM O'MALLEY

When we decided to stage "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" at McQuaid High School, friends began asking me why, what for, what do students know about that kind of people. My answer was nothing, that's why I want to do it, so they can learn that human life is more taxing than worrying about your acne or your crabgrass.

"Why not 'Macbeth' or 'The Merchant of Venice'?" "Well, in the first place, no one would come to that uplifting cultural event. And in the second, the first play is about a compulsive murderer and social climber and the second is a hymn to antisemitism. "Cuckoo's Nest" is only about frustration.

"Well, whatever happened to 'A Date with Judy' and 'Seven Keys to Baldpate'?" Well, I guess Vietnam happened. And Watergate happened. And TV happened. And Freud begat Jones, and Jones begat Kinsey, and Kinsey begat Hefner, and Hefner begat an unspeakable cornucopia of degrading pseudo-sophistication. The slick flesh magazines sell far better at the stands than U.S. Catholic. I've seen lots and lots of adults in airports all over the country browsing through them. They don't even roll them up anymore when they carry them away from the counter.

"Cuckoo's Nest" is not Disney. And it seems, at least to me, that we ought to stop treating our older adolescent kids as if they were more interested in ice cream than beer and more intrigued by the gospel of Mark than they are by the gospel of Flynt. I'm not saying they *should* be more interested in porn than in the prophets, nor that the situation is unchallengeable or irreversible. I'm saying that their interests will remain what they are unless we begin doing something about it — and in a drugstore on the other side of town, thou-shalt-nots are often not realistic enough. I'm saying their interests and values are what they are, what our generation has allowed them to become. The sooner we stop pretending that our youngsters are what our parents (wrongly) thought we were, then the sooner we can begin talking as adults to becoming-adults (which, if I mistake not, is what *adolescents* has always meant).

America is about the only place in the world where adolescence enjoys such a protracted existence. In other cultures, a young man or woman passes puberty and *ipso facto* passes out of the guarded realm of childhood and into the unguarded realm of adulthood and the work force — not only into its responsibilities but also into all its realizations: how to work hard for too little money; how to cope with the shattering of fairy-tale views of life, how to wash and lay out a dead body. In most cultures puberty comes as a shock, in America it comes as a rather good-natured joke.

For the last month I've been trying to find euphemisms with which to bowdlerize the gamier lines in "Cuckoo's Nest," and the

young actors moan, "You can't take that out! What's wrong with that?" But I keep telling them that I've been in business a long time. I've seen adults walk out of a McQuaid play because of a single rough word or line. So I continue to bowdlerize. To a point.

I've done it under the pretext that parents believe their children don't use those words and would be (or should be) shocked or shamed by them. At the same time, I've done it under the pretext that those words are somehow evil — as if they were "searing," even though I know swearing means blasphemy or false witness. I know that every evening they are treated to the same strong fare on TV; the later they stay up, the stronger the fare. But I must pretend that such words would profane young people's mouths, even when they are trying to understand and capture the inner reality of a human being who would indeed use them.

I think, with longing, of Chaucer, who knew there were no "bad" words and who put such things in their Christian place. I think, with longing, of Jesus himself, who so readily forgave whores and adulteresses with no declaration of species and number — and yet never tired of specifying and numbering the anti-human sins of the righteous Pharisees, who were very cautious with their words. I long for the time when we can peel away all the ill-educated *mishnah* interpreting the catechism and open up with the fresh, liberating, divinely compassionate Jesus.

How very much at home he would have been in the coarseness of the mental ward in "Cuckoo's Nest"! It was precisely for such smelly, vulgar, hungry souls that he "degraded" himself to walk in the clanging bazaars and lazarettos of man. Yet, it is paradoxically, from precisely such folk and their ill-considered, coarsely verbalized lives that we shield our children — long

after they have ceased to be children. I would not thrust a seventh-grader into an acute ward in the State Hospital nor into the ribald give-and-take of a construction job lunch hour. But I would feel I had done a reprehensible disservice to any becoming-adult (adolescent) if I were to continue the pretense that such vulgar language and ideas and people do not exist. The adult of such well-intentioned deception is Holden Caulfield: a boy reeling from culture shock when he begins to understand that all young people are not Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys and Man and Pa Walton.

All right: the ideas and the language? Because, for good or ill, language is the way human beings embody their selves. Surely, Dickens softened the gutter language of Fagin and Bill Sykes, and so have I. To a point. One must also suspect that the hardy fisherman of the gospels used quite pungent phrases

not acceptable on our modern high school stages. And so I soften. But to eliminate all harshness from the language of the outcasts is to eliminate the people themselves, to transfigure them into ugly people spouting refined discourse. Even the swaggering Rhett Butler is left to say, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a darn." Somehow, that just doesn't make it. And youngsters know it.

The word "Catholic", unlike what most Catholics believe, does not mean universal in the sense of "worldwide." The Church was catholic when its entire membership could be assembled in a single Upper Room. Catholic means universal in the sense of "all-embracing." One has only to read Paul to know that: neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, rich or poor, educated or unlettered can be excluded on those grounds. Granted there are essentials without which one cannot call himself Christian, but once those essentials are granted, the Church reaches out to the whole kaleidoscopic Family of Man. It is remarkable how many members of that family we shield our becoming-adult children from — with our hedges and tracts, our primness and caution. Perhaps we have forgotten that the Church is

the embodiment of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who came precisely for the outcasts. Perhaps in shielding youngsters from contamination, we are shielding them from their Christian mission.

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT

GET CLOSE TO SOPRANO



SAM SOPRANO knows that a good representative stays close to the people — he is committed to that. First he will listen, then he will represent the majority of the people in the 16th District.

**SAM SOPRANO**

Republican-Conservative-Independent  
Candidate

Monroe County Legislator

16th District

Paid for by "The Committee to Elect Soprano" Michael C. Palermo, Treasurer

*McCurdy's*



## DRESS YOUR FAVORITE CHAIR IN COLOR AND COMFORT CHAIR PADS BY CRAWFORD

A. Cotton velour tack-tufted rocker seat and back. Tie tapes hold pads in place. In gold, olive or slate, **\$20** Not shown: block needlepoint rocker seat and back set in gold or olive velour, **\$24**

B. Block needlepoint captain's chair seat pad. Zipper, tie-tapes. In gold or olive velour, **\$9**

C. Deacon's bench seat pad in gold,

green, rust, red, brown or slate corduroy. Zippered cushion, tie tapes, **\$12** Not shown: Tufted piano bench pad in same colors as above, **\$12**

D. Round hooked rug seat pad for captain's chair or other chairs. Also makes an attractive lamp pad. Multicolor, **\$5** Not shown: Hooked rug cricket foot stool, 13½" diameter by 9½" high with maple legs. Multicolor, **\$16**

—Draperies (D19) at Long Ridge and Northgate and all McCurdy stores—