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Professor fired for teaching Shakespeare gets new trial

By Andrea Billups
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A second trial has begun in the case of Jared Sakren, a distinguished theater professor at Arizona State University who sued the school claiming he was unfairly ousted by radical feminists who disagreed with his teaching of Shakespeare and other classical dramatic works.

His first trial, which drew national attention, ended in a hung jury last year.

This time, the former Yale University and Julliard Theatre Center drama teacher -- whose pupils have included Hollywood actors Annette Bening, Val Kilmer and Kelly McGillis -- hopes to convince an 11-member Phoenix jury that departmental politics and feminist agendas overshadowed his academic-freedom rights at the Tempe, Ariz., school.

The university, in opening statements two weeks ago, claimed Mr. Sakren's contract with ASU was not renewed because of inadequate performance and leadership skills, rather than campus politics.

Since his ouster in 1997, Mr. Sakren, a father of two young daughters, has founded the summer Sedona Shakespeare Festival, but has been unable to find full-time work as a university professor. He has been forced to switch careers, supporting his family as a financial planner, said his attorney Richard J. Harris.

"One of my client's claims is that he has been blacklisted," said Mr. Harris, who lauded Mr. Sakren as honorable, talented and courageous for pursuing his complaint of discrimination, which was filed in 1997.

A spokeswoman at ASU declined to comment on Mr. Sakren's accusations and

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referred calls to Lisa Hudson, a lawyer with the Arizona Attorney General's Office, who is representing the university at trial. Miss Hudson, along with ASU General Counsel Paul Ward, did not return calls from The Washington Times for comment.

The new trial, which is expected to last until mid-November, is also generating interest both inside and out of academe, with Miss Bening, who starred in "American Beauty," scheduled to testify on her former professor's behalf.

When his lawsuit was first filed, it spawned a firestorm of media attention, much of it critical, and the university issued a letter to theater departments and their alumni around the country defending its position in the Sakren case. Miss Bening was the recipient of such correspondence.

In one interview with CBS News, J. Robert Wills, dean of ASU's College of Fine Arts, suggested that Mr. Sakren was guilty of sexual harassment because of the classical curriculum he was teaching.

In a performance review, Mr. Sakren was accused of contributing to a climate of sexism by refusing to teach works from the "postmodern feminist/ethnic canon."

Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia organization that defends liberty on campus, calls it "one of the most significant academic-freedom cases in America today."

The facts of the case, he said, "should enrage anyone who cares about education."

"ASU hired an international superstar teacher, promised him academic freedom, and then expected him to follow the politically correct orthodoxy of radical feminism and watered-down academic standards," Mr. Halvorssen said. "When Sakren refused to cheat his students out of a good education, they fired him."

Sadly, said Mr. Halvorssen, it will be the Arizona taxpayers -- not the administrators -- who will end up footing the bill, should the jury award damages to Mr. Sakren.

"It is a scandal," he said of the case. "If the regents of the university had any integrity, they would investigate and then fire every administrator who played a role in this."

Alan Charles Kors, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and FIRE's president, said equally disturbing is the silence of the faculty in the Sakren case, particularly since the university has claimed that its contract with professors on the issue of academic freedom is too vague to enforce.

The deepest issue, Mr. Kors said, is the faculty and departmental refusal to endorse and defend "authentic intellectual pluralism, and their refusal to protect Jared Sakren from the new loyalty oaths of allegiance to political correctness."

"The administration is saying that its promise of academic freedom is not worth the paper it is written on, and that cynical abuse of power, if it is upheld by the courts, creates a Frankenstein that not even the politically correct will be able to control," he said. "It will turn against its creators in turn."

Winfield Myers of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Del., which has supported Mr. Sakren in his case, calls his treatment an outrage.

"In any politicized institution, where cronyism and politics can so easily trump merit, honest critics like Jared Sakren are a nightmare," Mr. Myers said.

Few colleagues have jumped to defend Mr. Sakren because they fear the same fate -- professional destruction, Mr. Myers said.

"They've had to silence him --even destroy him professionally --in order to maintain their comfortable positions as professional victims. This is just one more example of a concerted effort to prevent any critics from arising from within the academic camp."

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