

# dolly outrage

## When you're told to grow up THEN treated like a kid

**A Rock Eisteddfod show based on the war in Iraq put one school in the spotlight. So why aren't teens able to have an opinion?**



**H**ow many people must die in the pursuit of one bad man?" asked Sydney school Davidson High in its 2004 Rock Eisteddfod Challenge competition entry, "Bad Night in Baghdad". But with the performance's political theme addressing the war in Iraq, Davidson High became the focus of a media outcry.

After the school's heat-winning show, some audience members were so outraged with the political theme that they called a popular talkback radio show to voice their opinions. And Sydney newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* ran a story condemning the performance. Concerned readers wrote in, with some accusing the school of politicising students' education. "Schools were originally built as places of learning, but today are being wrongfully used by the cultural Left as institutions of brainwashing and propaganda," wrote one disgruntled audience member.

But it's not just war that some people feel teens shouldn't comment on or have opinions about. Last year, Bowral High School in NSW put on a show that included scenes depicting intercourse and oral sex. This year's students were told to tone it down, but the show was eventually cancelled because the school was concerned about receiving more negative media attention.

A spokesperson from the Department of Education said that performances should be consistent with the values of the wider community. So, could the adverse reaction to Davidson High's performance really be a general objection to teenagers commenting on issues that some people deem "adult"?

### What do teens know?

DOLLY readers were outraged at the attack on Davidson High and wrote in to tell us that the controversy highlighted a bigger

issue; that adults continue to treat teens like children – believing that they have no idea about world issues and, worse, that they shouldn't voice their opinions publicly.

The students at Davidson High were also obviously upset and devastated by the negative media attention, rejecting the idea that their teachers were forcing views upon them. One of the show's performers, Year 10 student Ashley Coward, said that the students were motivated by sympathy for victims of the war. "Mr Peade [the teacher in charge of the performance] said not to listen to these people and to form our own views, 100%," says Ashley. "He said we shouldn't believe the news media, the government or Mr Peade." Year 11 Rock Eisteddfod performer, Alana Harrison, agreed, adding: "People think Mr Peade has planted this in our minds, but it is a real-life issue."

Chris Bonnor, principal of Davidson High school, was also shocked. He'd sent letters home to the families of the performers, explaining the theme they had chosen, and not a single parent objected to their child taking part. "They live in a real world where there are real wars going on," he said of his students. "They see this debate and may engage in it."

Principal Bonnor says that a lot of people tend to "devalue the capacity of young people". He defended the claims that the teachers at Davidson High pushed their political ideals on the students. He says: "Saying teachers influence students is talking about students as if they are passive receivers, absorbing all these messages without critical thought. It's really devaluing the intelligence of young people and it doesn't reflect reality." The reality, he says, is that "everyone has opinions, and engaging in those issues is critical for young people."

Renee Ferenc, PR manager for the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge Foundation, was also stunned when the school was singled out for its political performance. "We've always celebrated the fact that the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge is a forum and platform for youth voice," says Renee. "Students often choose issues that affect them; issues that are topical. Some of the social and political themes explored over the years include: immigration, child abuse, schoolyard bullying, drug abuse, multiculturalism, asylum seekers, genetic engineering, mental illness, abortion, same-sex marriages, contraception, cloning, racism, homosexuality, euthanasia and HIV."

"The Rock Eisteddfod Challenge has also had schools comment on Hiroshima, the Holocaust, East Timor, September 11, Tiananmen Square, Gallipoli, WWI, WWII, Apartheid and the Cultural Revolution."

### Stop the stereotypes

So why do so many people think teens don't care or, more insultingly, don't know about what's happening around them? Claire, 13, says: "It's degrading. My friend was killed in the Bali bombings and I haven't missed any news about what's going to happen to [Bali bomber] Amrozi."

Emma, a 15-year-old student, is similarly outraged: "We do discuss wars and what is going on in the world," she argues. "We are a smart generation, and with all the media attention we can't help but to learn and understand issues such as war. We like to know about things like this because we realise that this world is our future."

**Davidson High School came equal first in the Open Final of the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge on September 9, 2004.**