In the wake of Monday’s massacre at Virginia Tech in which a student killed 32 people, Dean of Student Affairs Betty Trachtenberg has limited the use of stage weapons in theatrical productions.

Students involved in this weekend’s production of “Red Noses” said they first learned of the new rules on Thursday morning, the same day the show was slated to open. They were subsequently forced to alter many of the scenes by swapping more realistic-looking stage swords for wooden ones, a change that many students said was neither a necessary nor a useful response to the tragedy at Virginia Tech.

According to students involved in the production, Trachtenberg has banned the use of some stage weapons in all of the University’s theatrical productions. While shows will be permitted to use obviously fake plastic weapons, students said, those that hoped to stage more realistic scenes of stage violence have had to make changes to their props.

Trachtenberg could not be reached for comment Thursday night.

“Red Noses” director Sarah Holdren ’08 said she first heard about the changes in a phone call from a friend as she arrived at the Off-Broadway Theater on Thursday morning. At the theater, technical director Jim Brewczyński told her about the new regulations. The pair then met with Trachtenberg, who initially wanted no stage weapons to be used in the show, Holdren said, though she later agreed to permit the use of obviously fake weapons.

In a speech made before last night’s opening show of “Red Noses,” Holdren said that Trachtenberg’s decision to force the production to use wooden swords instead of metal swords will do little to stem violence in the world.

“Calling for an end to violence onstage does not solve the world’s suffering: It merely sweeps it under the rug, turning theater — in the words of this very play — into ‘creamy bon-bons’ instead of ‘solid fare’ for a thinking, feeling audience,” she said. “Here at Yale, sensitivity and political correctness have become censorship in this time of vital need for serious artistic expression.”

Holdren said she is primarily worried about the University’s decision to place limitations on art, rather than the specific inconvenience to her production.

“I completely understand that the University needs to respond to the tragedy, but I think it is wrong to conflate sensitivity and censorship,” she said in an interview. “It is wrong to assume that any theater that deals with tragic matter is sort of on the side of those things or out to get people; they’re not — they’re out to help people through things like this. I want my show and all shows to be uplifting to people. That’s why I’m upset about this — it’s not because my props were taken — it’s about imposing petty restrictions on art as the right way to solve the problems in the world.”

Brandon Berger ’10, who plays a swordsman in the show, said the switch to an obviously fake wooden sword has changed the nature of his part from an “evil, errant knight to a petulant child.”

“They’re trying to make an appropriate gesture, but they did it in an inappropriate way — they’ve neutered the play,” he said. “The violence is important to what it actually means. What these types of actions do is very central — it is not gratuitous.”

Susie Kemple ’08, an actress in the show, said Trachtenberg’s way of dealing with the Virginia Tech massacre was not beneficial to the students’ own mourning process.

“It is problematic because all of us were incredibly shocked by the events at Virginia Tech,” Kemple said.
"We turn to extracurriculars in our grief [and] the Yale administration makes the healing more difficult. None of the shows are about massive gun violence — this show is about showing and explaining the human experience."

Berger also said he finds the ruling inconsistent because forms of stage violence that do not involve weapons — such as hangings — are still permitted.

"Red Noses" will end its run Saturday night.