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Challenging campus free speech through theater

As he prepares for his next play, Chris Lee questions WSU's belief in students' First Amendment rights.

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Chris Lee may choose to not graduate.

Lee, a senior theatre major, will stay until he is 85 years old if he has too, he said. WSU has to learn students' First Amendment rights before he leaves.

"I want the message of freedom and speech to go through here before I go," Lee said. "I'd rather move on and know this school is going to let freedom ring."

Spring semester, "Passion of the Musical" closed on Apr. 21 with a protest. Lee wrote, directed and starred as Lucifer in the play. Protesters who disliked the message of Lee's self-acknowledged offensive play stood up and said, "I'm offended."

After the protesters interrupted the last performance of Lee's play in the CUB, a charge was filed with the Center for Human Rights. Lee feels the protesters infringed upon his freedom of speech rights by interrupting his performance.

Those opposed to Lee think the protesters were expressing their First Amendment right. Tickets were made available for 40 protesters courtesy of Campus Involvement.

Lee gave CHR materials including a script of the play and a video tape recording of the last performance.

"He gave us everything we needed to come to a conclusion that he didn't like," CHR Director Raul Sanchez said.

CHR found in favor of the protesters last spring.

There are legal limitations on free speech if public safety is in question, there is an incitement to violence and fighting words, Sanchez said.

Before members of the WSU community entered the CUB to watch the play, protesters handed out a statement.

The first time Lee appeared on stage as Lucifer he read the statement to the audience, which began, "This is an offensive play." This act, CHR found, converted the theater into a classical public forum instead of a private performance, Sanchez said.

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In hindsight, Lee admits that "Passion of the Musical" could have been better. The theatre department didn't want the show in Daggy hall because it was pointless, he said.

Laurilyn Harris, director of theatre programs, asked Lee what the point of his final project was and he responded that it was to offend people, she said. All senior theatre majors get three credits for an end project.

"Usually senior end projects have some purpose greater than offending as many people as possible," Harris said.

Theatre faculty discussed Lee's play and decided not to allow the use of Daggy's theater.

"It has a good deal of hate speech," Harris said. "It certainly wasn't suitable for a university venue."

"Passion of the Musical" included use of the n-word and jokes about homosexuals, AIDS and many races. At one point, lyrics to a Whitney Houston song were changed from, "I will always love you," to "I will always hate Jews." During the saxophone solo an actor dressed as Hitler came out to play the instrument.

Lee wouldn't change the airing of the show, however.

"Maybe by doing a show without meaning, the after-effect can have meaning," he said.

Having open public forums to discuss issues of race is an after effect Lee said he would like to see. By having the show he also received numerous job offers, including working on the entertainment board at a casino in Las Vegas, he said.

Lee has also enjoyed the national media coverage, he said.

"I am a popularity slut," Lee said. "I'll admit to it."

"Mangina Monologues" is Lee's next play, set for a Nov. 17 opening. Auditions are 4:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Oct. 19 and 20 in Butch's Den.

"Passion" was a learning experience for Lee. His next play will have strict warning labels stating management, which is him, has the right to refuse service and to remove any audience member who is disrespectful, he said.

Price adjustments have also been made. A range of \$5 for students to \$100 for WSU or University of Idaho administrators will be enforced.

As for Lee's upcoming plays, Sanchez plans to attend in case another controversy arises.

"It'll probably shorten the amount of investigation we have to do if I'm actually a witness there," he said.

Sanchez is not usually comfortable discussing cases, but Lee has made the case public already, he said.

The information and documents of Lee's process can be found at www.thefire.org.

The \$100 is bit steep, but Sanchez is willing to pay, he said.

"If I have any reason to believe there is going to be efforts from anyone to infringe

upon free speech [I will attend],” Sanchez said. “And that’s the honest truth.”

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