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Tuesday, July 19, 2005

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# WSU chief stands by protesters at biting play

Group sought reversal of stance on emotionally charged April show

**Shawn Vestal**  
Staff writer  
July 14, 2005

Washington State University President V. Lane Rawlins refused Wednesday to renounce the school's position on an "intentionally offensive" student play that deteriorated into a shouting match in April.

A national advocacy group, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, asked Rawlins to do so, arguing that his apparent support for about 40 protesters who disrupted a performance of "Passion of the Musical" amounts to supporting the censorship of the "heckler's veto."

"Performing a play is constitutionally protected free speech," the group said in its letter. "However, disrupting a play is not."



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In a five-sentence letter sent Wednesday, Rawlins essentially thanked FIRE for its interest and suggestions, without addressing the incident directly.

In an earlier letter to the group, Rawlins wrote, "I assure you that WSU, my administration and I are committed to everyone's exercise of all their human rights at WSU, including free speech."

Student playwright Chris Lee wrote and staged "Passion of the Musical," a musical parody of the final days of Jesus Christ, on campus in April. The play includes

racial epithets, ethnic stereotypes and irreverent jokes about religion – Lee likens it to "South Park" or "Chappelle's Show," two popular, boundary-pushing television shows.

"My purpose was to create something so offensive it couldn't be offensive," Lee said.

But some students and faculty were deeply offended. A group of about 40 attended the final performance April 21, and shouted "I am offended" during portions of the play. Lee said the shouts also included death threats, and he interrupted the play to threaten the audience with ejection or arrest – though security officers at the play would do neither.

Administrators at WSU could not be reached for comment Wednesday. But the university's Center for Human Rights concluded in a May 13 letter to Lee that he had directly provoked and taunted the audience, giving the play the "qualities of a public forum."

"You are not free to shield yourself behind the label of playwright or actor, and assume no responsibility for the consequences of your words and deeds," the letter said, according to FIRE.

Rawlins, who was out of town Wednesday, earlier expressed support for the protesters. In an e-mail to an assistant professor, Rawlins said he thought the protesters had "exercised their rights of free speech in a very responsible manner," the student newspaper, the Daily Evergreen, reported in late April.

Lee said he had hoped the university would respond to the FIRE letter by acknowledging his concerns about free speech or the safety of performers, and was disappointed by Rawlins' response.

"I really thought the university would say something else this time," he said. "It shows that they truly don't care."

Lee and the FIRE letters argue that free-speech rights don't apply to an audience during a performance like a play. Rather than acting out of a motive to express themselves, the protesters' actions were an act of censorship, he said.

Many of the protesters received free tickets through the Office of Campus Involvement, but officials have said the money for the tickets came from private donations, not university funding.

Lee said the shouts included death threats, and that some people in his audience felt unsafe. He said that, instead of protecting the show and ejecting the protesters, he was told by police and university officials to censor the lyrics in an upcoming song – which he did, changing the words of "I Would Do Anything for God, But I Won't Act Black," to "I Would Do Anything for God, But I Won't Act Blank."

The play also included a song called "I Will Always Hate Jews," to the tune of "I Will Always Love You," as well as a scene with Jesus as a zombie, and one with Lucifer – played by Lee – singing "Hell is So Sweet."

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Particularly controversial was the use of "nigger" and other racial epithets. Lee, who is black, said the play used the words to comic and satiric effect.

"Pontius Pilate was a racist, but none of it is rewarded," he said. "We weren't applauding his racism."

After Lee complained and was given the letter from the Center for Human Rights, FIRE got involved. The group works on a variety of campus issues – advocating for free speech on campuses that have become too "politically correct," fighting what it sees as anti-religious bias, and defending rights such as due process and legal equality, according to FIRE's Web site.

The group has sent two letters to Rawlins. The last one, sent July 1, asked the university to "publicly renounce its defense of the heckler's veto" and clarify its position regarding students' rights to free speech.

"Washington State's security obligation was to protect the performance – not to enforce the will of a mob that it claimed teetered on the brink of violence," said the letter, which was signed by Greg Lukianoff of FIRE.

But the university argued that in this case – with Lee and other cast members directly addressing the audience and provoking them – the play had crossed a line and become a different kind of event.

"No one should seek to censor you," said the Center for Human Rights letter to Lee, "but it is not unreasonable to expect you to act more responsibly in anticipating public reactions to your theatrical productions."

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