



Play promotion stokes debate on race, language

Some businesses refuse flier for Washington Center performance

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The name of a play to be performed next week is posing a challenge for The Washington Center for the Performing Arts, which is trying to promote it.

The intent of "N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk," written and performed by men of color, is to use comedy to defuse the power of racial slurs. But several establishments that regularly hang posters for the center refused to post this one, out of concern the title would offend people.

A teaser poster for the Wednesday performance gave little information other than large black letters advertising "N*W*C" and smaller red letters identifying it as "The Race Show."

A week ago, two of the posters were taped back to back on the glass doors of the county building that houses the Thurston County Sheriff's Office. After learning what the letters stood for, a county employee tore the signs down.

Posters spelling out the full title went out Monday.

"We started putting out posters today and instantly ran into difficulty with people not wanting to put them up," said Kevin Boyer, the center's director of marketing.

The center has a list of about 350 places where it routinely hangs posters for its plays, Boyer said. At least five businesses and offices declined to hang the posters this week.

In places where the show was advertised, the name sparked debate about whether using the words is appropriate.

Tim Carns, owner of Cutters Point Coffee in Lacey, said the center pulled a fast one on him by not telling him what the letters on the first poster meant.

"If I would have ever known what the initials stood for, I would have never put it up in the window," Carns said. "I'm offended as a Caucasian."

When the distributor came by this week with the follow-up poster, Carns took down the old one and decided he would no longer advertise Washington Center shows, he said.

The distributor explained that the play is about breaking down racism, Carns said. The show, awarded "Best Play" by the American Readers Theater Association in 2003, depicts the actors' experiences as minorities.

Still, Carns said he doesn't understand why they'd use words in the title that shouldn't be said out loud. "If I was an African American or an Asian American ... I would not know what the content of the play is," he added. "I would simply see the poster that called me derogatory names."

Don Krupp, Thurston County's chief administrative officer, said he decided not to allow either sign because he heard complaints a year or two ago about a different theatrical poster using the N-word. "Sometimes folks, when they see something like that -- it may be very well-intentioned in terms of the production that it refers to -- the language made some folks feel uncomfortable," he said. "It was sort of a line I really didn't want to step over."

Race is the "elephant in the dining room, dancing on a table in a polka-dot dress, and we can't talk about it," said Nat Jackson, who is active with the James Byrd Foundation for Racial Healing. Byrd was a black man in Texas who was beaten and dragged to death behind a pickup in 1998. Three white men who were later convicted of his murder used the N-word multiple times during the attack, Jackson said.

"Kids need to know that these kinds of things happen," he said. "They need to know why they happen, how they happen, how detrimental and destructive they are."

Jackson, a longtime leader in the black community, works with area schools to encourage acceptance of diversity and positive race relations. He doesn't have a problem with the slurs being used for those purposes.

"It's hard to educate without using the words," he said. He hadn't seen the N*W*C posters, so he couldn't say whether he found them objectionable.

"We generally encourage kids to check themselves about their own racial slurs," Jackson added. "Our position is that the hip-hop generation should not be using those terms."

Hip-hop and rap artists have desensitized some people to the power of racial slurs, including writer Bryan Connolly of Olympia.

"I don't know if they're taboo anymore," he said. "It seems like in this day and age, nothing is offensive anymore."

Connolly was hanging posters for an all-night horror movie marathon at the Capitol Theater. He said it would make more sense for people to be disturbed by his posters, which depicted a man with his guts hanging out and the words, "Die die kill kill."

People in Olympia know better than to think a performance at The Washington Center would feature white supremacists or be a "racist jam," Connolly added.

"So many situations where people are afraid of offending people, no one's actually offended," said Zack Carlson, Connolly's friend and an employee of Orca Books.

A poster for "N*gger Wetb*ck Ch*nk" hung in the bookstore window on Fourth Avenue. "I guess it's OK because it has an asterisk," Connolly joked.

At Last Word Books, a customer saw a poster on the door and said, "Something subversive in the window, right on," said David Accurso, one of the co-owners.

Neither bookstore had heard complaints.

Talking about it

The play's title prompted discussions at Saint Martin's University, which had workshops Tuesday with actors from the play.

Renee Ellis, director of the Office of Intercultural Initiatives at the university, has been playing a promotional DVD of N*W*C in her office.

"I met with a great deal of emotion," she said. "Some people are laughing their heads off." Others reacted with, "Turn it off, I don't want to watch this," she said.

As an African-American woman, Ellis said, she related to some of the experiences depicted in the show. "It's funny ha-ha, yes," she said. "But comedy associated with stereotypes -- it's really sad."

Some students were angered by the DVD and the posters, she said. Others were brought to tears.

Ellis does not find the title offensive. She took a flier to a class at the university and asked students to read it to her.

"I can't say those words," was the response.

Pointing out that asterisks replaced key vowels in the title, Ellis asked, "Are there words on that page?" "I understand where it comes from," she said later. "Those are the discussions that need to be had."

For some, racism is too serious an issue to be the subject of comedy, she said. And the words are too provocative to be used, even theatrically.

"If you can't get past the words, you can't get to the real issue that lies beneath," she said.

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