

## Case 14

# Lakewood Players

Jacquelyn Warwick

As the lights went down and the curtain was about to open, Bob Jones, chairman of the board of directors for the Lakewood Players, looked worriedly around the theater at the sparse audience. He had been concerned about ticket sales ever since the managing/artistic director, Scott White, had begun putting on what Jones considered “experimental” plays—plays with titles no one recognized, by unknown writers, and not considered well-written. This past season included plays such as *Inside Out*, and *Lloyd’s Prayer*, as well as *The Crucifer of Blood* (see Figure C14.1). As the play was about to begin, Jones whispered to his wife, “We need to get more action in front of the curtain than behind the curtain.”

### **History**

The theater had not begun with experimental plays. In 1938, under the auspices of the Lakewood Arts Foundation, a small nonprofit group established themselves as the Lakewood Players and performed in the old Lakewood Theater while dreaming of the day they would have their own theater. This group of theater devotees produced several shows and was lauded as a “cultural asset” in the August 18, 1938, edition of the *Lakewood Log*. Performances were usually preceded by lavish dinner parties and followed by cast parties that were enjoyed fully by both the performers and their affluent hosts. The theater was part of the Lakewood social scene.

In 1960, heightened by the excitement of the coming Seattle World’s Fair (1962) and all the activities that surrounded that event, the Villa Plaza Development Company donated land next to the Lakewood Mall for the construction of a theater. Money had already

LAKESWOOD COMMUNITY THEATRE  
presents our  
1997 Season Finale!  
**Kevin Kling's**  
**Lloyd's Prayer**

The Season closes with the  
side-splitting, hair-raising,  
falling-down funny comedy  
about love and faith.  
Come see if a raccoon boy,  
an evangelist con man,  
an old doctor, and an angel  
have a prayer of finding  
truth and goodness.

All show times 8 PM except  
Sundays at 2 PM  
Gala Opening, Fri. May 30  
Fridays and Saturdays, May 31-June 28  
Sundays-June 15th and 29th  
Low Cost Thursdays June 5th & 19th  
(only \$5 with can of food)  
All other tickets: \$9 general  
\$5 Military & Student  
\$7 Children & Seniors  
Opening night tickets \$1 more.  
Parental discretion advised for children  
under eight years of age.

LAKESWOOD COMMUNITY THEATRE  
presents  
**THE CRUCIFER OF BLOOD**  
A THRILLING SHERLOCK HOLMES MYSTERY ADVENTURE  
WRITTEN BY THE RENOWNED JAMES JOYCE GOSWAMI  
ORIGINATED BY THE LAKESWOOD THEATRE TRUST FUND, KANSAS CITY  
PRODUCTION BY THE LAKESWOOD COMMUNITY THEATRE AND KANSAS CITY THEATRE TRUST FUND

Waltz Opening House Features & Reception  
Friday at 8:00 pm, October 4<sup>th</sup>—Cost: \$30.00  
Presents and Saturdays at 8:00 pm, October 6<sup>th</sup>—House: 28<sup>th</sup>  
Presents Saturdays at 2:00 pm, October 20, 27 & House: 24<sup>th</sup>  
\$7.00 House, \$6.00 Military & Student, \$5.00 Senior & Children  
Thursday, October 10<sup>th</sup> at 8:00 pm—Cost: \$2.00 with a can of food  
Special Halloween Show, Thursday, October 24<sup>th</sup> at 8:00 pm—Presents, Food & Party—Cost: \$5.00  
\*Final House: 18<sup>th</sup>—Shows for the remainder of  
the season are subject to change and confirmation that the show will  
be located in the MC Courtyard of the Lakeswood Hall.

FIGURE C14.1. Lakewood Players 1996-1997 Season

been raised and with the added help of two main company sponsors, Douglas Plywood Company and Weyerhaeuser, the Lakewood Community Theater was completed with no outstanding debt. Thus, the only expenses the organization paid regularly were the heat, lights, and water. Since the theater's completion, the Lakewood Players performed numerous well-known, well-written plays such as *Our Town*, *Oliver*, *Damn Yankees*, *The Nerd*, and *The Odd Couple*.

Jones knew there had been a great deal of enthusiasm before World War II and afterward one or two prominent people had helped the theater to establish an identity. Over the years more people had become involved, the number of plays per season had grown, the community

had attended the plays, and the identity of the theater had become stronger.

Now Jones felt that community support seemed to be ebbing. Play attendance was down and the community did not seem to be realizing the value of the theater. The city of Lakewood, which should have held their 100th-year birthday party at the Lakewood Community Theater, instead held the celebration next door at the Lakewood Mall. To make matters worse, a volunteer representing the Lakewood Players got into a fight with others at the birthday celebration. In addition, new neighbors appeared. The city of Lakewood constructed a major bus transfer station between the mall and the theater, further alienating the two groups.

### ***Organizational Structure***

The Lakewood Players bylaws stated that the board of directors could not exceed fifteen members. Over the years, the board usually had no more than nine members. The current board consisted of a tightly knit group of only six which included four women who ranged in age from early thirties to mid-fifties and two men both over sixty. With the exception of one board member, they were all active in the workforce. The board had a problem getting new members who wanted to actively participate in decision making. Thus, they were considering initiating an “honorary board” for those who wanted minimal involvement, but would like to be associated with the Lakewood Players.

The only salaried employee was the managing/artistic director who reported directly to the board. The managing director had to be educated and have general knowledge of the theater. This position was considered full-time and involved many tasks (see Box C14.1) including researching and evaluating which plays would be offered for the coming season. If the managing director wanted other outside professional work while continuing to be employed by the Lakewood Players, the board needed to approve the request. White, the current managing director, was hired two years ago. The last managing director had stayed five years before moving back East to continue with his career in theater. White had started to recommend unknown, newer plays shortly after he arrived to entertain the people who already were

### **BOX C14.1. Managing/Artistic Director Duties**

#### **Duties to be met or overseen**

Casting	Performance programming
Scheduling	Sound design/operation
Rehearsal	Stage management
Set design/construction/paint	Box office management
Lighting design/hang and focus/repair/operation	Front-of-house management
Properties design/build/acquire	Concessions management
Costume design/build/acquire	

#### **Duties unrelated to the plays**

House cleaning	Grounds/property/signage
Physical plant	Contracting talent (supplemental)
Errands	Community events
General theater tech/rigging	
Capital improvements	

#### **Duties requiring ample attention**

PR/marketing	Hiring teachers
Art/design	Registration
Copy	Phone reception
Production	Class project production
Distribution	Education management
Advertising	Curriculum planning
Press releases	Reviews

coming to the theater and to draw in the twenty- to forty-year-olds who were not attending.

The managing director oversaw three distinct groups of individuals. First, the play directors who worked as subcontractors and were paid a nominal amount for their work. Usually, there was a different play director for each show. Second, two very separate groups of volunteers: those who volunteer to act in the plays and go through auditions, and those who did everything from costume design to taking tickets and painting the building.

The majority of volunteers were high school or college students ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-five. Many were involved in

drama classes at school, and the theater gave them a viable outlet to become involved in the arts. At the start of the season, there is a rich source of volunteers but the managing director needs to set aside quality time to get volunteers doing meaningful tasks. When this does not happen, the volunteers become frustrated, and this frustration is turned toward the managing director. The managing director then gets irritated which simply adds to the frustration level of the volunteers. At this point many may leave with a bad taste in their mouth over their theater experience.

### ***Performances at Lakewood Playhouse***

The managing/artistic director made all decisions concerning which plays would be offered each season. White contacted local directors, actors, and writers, as well as board members, to be on a reading committee. These volunteers read and suggested plays the theater could perform. Board members chose not to attend. White rejected the feedback to perform well-written plays with dynamic roles. Members of the committee felt White was choosing plays that were not well written. The play selections were passed to the board for approval but the board was not actually part of the decision loop. There was simply an expectation of implied approval once the board received the list for the coming season.

For many years the age range of the audiences who attended the Lakewood Community Theater was approximately fifty to sixty years old. Although Jones did not attend all the plays, he believed that in the past two years, the audiences were closer to being in their forties. Jones had also observed that the audiences attending the plays seemed to be the same regardless of which play was running. Given the theater's 150-seat capacity, the board considered plays that had an average of eighty to ninety attendees per night as good plays. However, a "red flag of distress" went up when the average attendance was only thirty to fifty people per night.

The Lakewood Community Players' season ran from October 1 through the June 30 with six plays, each typically running four to five weeks. There were two-week breaks between plays so the next play in the sequence could be advertised before it actually started. The plays were performed each Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night with special Sunday matinees.

Candy bars, cookies, coffee, and soda were served before each play and during the intermission. Opening night included a special “board of director’s buffet” in which a light meal was served and the audience could stay to meet the actors.

When White first began his job and attendance was low he went to the board and asked, “If this play isn’t successful, why not just close the doors?” The defensive response of the board came quickly, “Shut the doors? Never! The play will go on until the end!” White did not point out that on Broadway, if a play does not do well, the doors are closed. While White was at this meeting he also suggested cutting down the number of weeks a play ran. White assumed that if a play ran for three weeks instead of five, the same people would attend but in a shorter time frame. The board rejected this idea also.

### *Financial Information*

Ticket prices varied. Opening night performances, which included the board of director’s buffet, were ten dollars per person. An average performance was nine dollars for adults, eight dollars for military personnel, and seven dollars for senior citizens and students. Four options were available for purchasing season tickets.

Organizations also had two options for hosting a performance. A specific performance could be hosted for \$400, which would allow the entire organization to attend but would also allow open admission for others. An organization could also host an “exclusive” performance at a cost of \$500. Currently, only one group consistently purchased one performance of each play in this manner. The organization allowed open admission during these performances.

Organizations could also sponsor a play in one of two ways: support a play for a single night’s run for \$1,000, or sponsor a single play’s entire run for \$2,000. Usually, six to eight organizations regularly sponsored an entire run of a play. As the managing director, it was White’s job to contact local organizations to attain these sponsorships. The board members did realize, however, that it was equally their responsibility to establish strong contacts in the community to help White solicit funds.

Several area arts organizations were available for assistance, including the Washington State Arts Commission, Pierce County Arts Commission, and the Tacoma Arts Commission. The Tacoma Arts

Commission, as well as other organizations, requires a theater to have a minimal budget of \$50,000 as well as a budget audit before an application for a grant is considered. Jones considered the audit a stumbling block since the Lakewood Players had the required budget but could not seem to get the required budget audit. Jones stated, "You need to make sure where the money is going but the audit has to be in an acceptable form. We have two CPAs on our board but they won't do it; they can't since there is the issue of conflict of interest. We need to go to an outside source and get this done, but in the meantime we aren't applying for grants."

### ***Competition***

The theater had three main competitors that the board thought were all similarly priced. The Tacoma Little Theatre and the Tacoma Musical Group were both approximately ten miles away. The Performance Circle, which performed in Gig Harbor, was approximately thirty miles away. The Lakewood Players did not consider ACT, a theater in Seattle, to be a competitor because it presented professional touring plays and the Lakewood Players were all volunteer actors.

### ***Promotional Activities***

The theater did its main advertising by distributing pamphlets during several different times of the year. A summer educational mailing, another in the fall promoting season ticket purchases, and finally a reminder pamphlet was sent out before each of the six plays. These pamphlets were distributed using a database consisting of 3,000 to 5,000 households of past season ticket holders, donors, and volunteers.

A description of the current play was listed in the feature "Art Tix" which ran every Friday in the local paper, *The News Tribune*. An advertisement was also placed in the *Lakewood Journal/University Place Journal*, another smaller local weekly paper. The board was considering placing an ad even when no plays were running just to keep the theater in front of the public eye, but nothing had been decided concerning that proposal.

Jones also liked the idea of posters being placed all around the community. He felt that this was very educational and would keep the

public informed of what was playing. Jones and White had several discussions on this form of advertising. White could not see the benefit of using the posters and often claimed that it did not seem to matter whether they used them or not; it did not seem to change the attendance for a play.

There seemed to be no interest in developing informational material that board members, or other volunteers, could pass out to friends, family members, or the community at large, explaining the presence of the theater. Also, although board members were involved in organizations such as the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce, they had not built strong theater-related ties with this group.

### ***1996-1997 Performance Assessment***

Lakewood Players' handbills proclaimed, "Don't miss this year's Season of Dreams!" but given audience turnout, it appeared that some did. Six plays were offered, all of which were considered "experimental" (plays with unknown titles and/or authors). The season began with a well-attended play, *The Crucifer of Blood*, a thrilling but not well-known Sherlock Holmes mystery adventure. This was followed by *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, an adaptation of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. This play was also well attended; however, a majority of those who attended were the family and friends of the children who were performing. This production was followed by *Dark Side*, a space adventure that was touted to contain "edge-of-your-seat tension." Although many thought this play was well done, it did not do well at the box office. *Inside Out*, a "chic comedy that fits all sizes," was performed and was considered very successful. However, for *Graceland*, attendance was low. (Jones' conclusion: "Elvis may be a big hit in the South, but he does not draw people in our area.") *Lloyd's Prayer* was said to be "a side-splitting, hair-raising, falling-down funny" comedy and was the final event of the season. Again, it was not well received by the audience and numbers were low. Overall, this season, as well as the last, was not what the board had expected.

### ***Board Meeting***

Many weighty issues were discussed at the last board meeting. The biggest concern was low play attendance. Someone suggested that



the Lakewood Players had lost their identity. The board members indicated that they all thought it stemmed from the plays that had been run the past two seasons. The overwhelming answer: change back to well-known plays such as the 1994-1995 season and the problem would be resolved. Although all agreed, Jones seemed willing to “leave the door open a bit” by suggesting that there could still be room for a new but well-written play if it was not a “cutting-edge” play.

A board member suggested that the Lakewood Community Theater be used all the time. Others quickly agreed that it needed to be used year-round for activities when there were no performances. As this topic came to an end, a very serious discussion took place concerning the Players’ community outreach program that many on the board termed as “not great” and “in need of help.” The conversation revolved around the need to cultivate new people and enhance community relations. Some members thought the Players needed to educate the public, especially young people, to get them enthused about the theater.

Finally, the discussion turned to the decision of whether they should replace White and hire another artistic director. After assessing many different issues, no decisions were made by the board, and the meeting was adjourned. They agreed to meet the following month to decide on a course of action. Jones now had to develop his own plan to recommend at the next meeting.