

Old Vic cancels Terry Gilliam and *Into the Woods*: An attack on free speech and artistic freedom

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The Old Vic's cancellation of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*, co-directed by Terry Gilliam, is a shameful act of political and cultural censorship that has far-reaching implications for artists and audiences alike.

Last week's decision has no precedent on London's West End, with an entire production effectively "disappeared" in retribution for Gilliam's public criticism of the #MeToo movement.

The 80-year-old Monty Python co-creator, animator, actor and director has previously skewered gender and identity politics and described #MeToo as a "witch hunt."

The theatre's brief "update" last Thursday announced that "The Old Vic and co-producers Scenario Two have mutually agreed that the production of *Into the Woods*, scheduled for spring 2022, will not take place at The Old Vic," with the insincere sign-off that, "The Old Vic wishes the show well for its future life."

Industry publication *The Stage* reported the show was cancelled following "unrest within the organisation about its original decision to programme the production." A "number of people closely associated with the London theatre ... revealed that dissatisfaction among staff and regular freelancers began back in May when the show was originally announced."

"The unrest," writes *The Stage*, "is understood to have stemmed from director Gilliam's previous comments in the press relating to trans rights, race and the #MeToo movement, which some within the Old Vic team felt to be at odds with the theatre's culture and values."

One can think of many legitimate reasons for "unrest" at this time. A preventable global pandemic has killed five million people worldwide, 160,000 of these in the UK, with artists' livelihoods decimated. Low pay and precarious employment for the vast majority of workers in the industry have worsened considerably. But those targeting Gilliam are driven by selfish objectives, indifferent to the foul environment their actions will help create.

In a statement issued to *The Stage*, the Old Vic confirmed that its senior management met with Gilliam and co-director Leah Housman earlier this year "as a matter of course to

discuss our culture and values." According to the *Evening Standard*, Gilliam "was told he had to apologise for his [#MeToo] comments if the show was to go ahead. But before an apology could be agreed, Gilliam is said to have further offended staff when he used his Facebook account to tell his almost half-a-million followers to watch [Dave] Chapelle's new Netflix show."

Gilliam's Facebook post encouraged his followers to watch Dave Chappelle's new show, *The Closer*, describing him as "the greatest standup comedian alive today: incredibly intelligent, socially aware, dangerously provocative, and gut-wrenchingly funny." He added, "There is a storm brewing over Netflix's support for the show. I'd love to hear your opinions."

In fact, Chappelle's special was neither intelligent, socially aware, dangerously provocative nor gut-wrenchingly funny, and Gilliam's response reveals the limitations in his own outlook, a type of amorphous iconoclasm. However, Gilliam's support for Chappelle was merely icing on the cake for his opponents, with the director already in the crosshairs over his statements critical of #MeToo.

In 2018, he was one of the few artists to speak out against the campaign. He told AFP: "The mob is out there, they are carrying their torches and they are going to burn down Frankenstein's castle."

Producer Harvey Weinstein had been targeted, Gilliam explained, "because he is an asshole and he made so many enemies." But he stated pointedly, "It is a world of victims. I think some people did very well out of meeting with Harvey and others didn't. The ones who did, knew what they were doing. These are adults, we are talking about adults with a lot of ambition. ... I know enough girls who were in Harvey's suites who were not victims and walked out."

Later that year, Gilliam criticised the BBC's new comedy guidelines after Shane Allen, the state broadcaster's controller of comedy commissioning, took a swipe at *Monty Python* during a press conference, asserting, "If you're going to assemble a [comedy] team now, it's not going to be six Oxbridge white blokes. It's going to be a diverse range of people who reflect the modern world."

Gilliam responded at the launch of his film *The Killed Don Quixote* (2018), telling the audience, “I no longer want to be a white male, I don’t want to be blamed for everything wrong in the world: I tell the world now I’m a black lesbian.” Invoking a sketch from Python’s *The Life of Brian*, Gilliam quipped, “My name is Loretta and I’m a BLT, a black lesbian in transition.”

He concluded on a serious note, “[Allen’s] statement made me so angry, all of us so angry. Comedy is not assembled, it’s not like putting together a boy band where you put together one of this, one of that, [until] everyone is represented.”

Gilliam has continued to stick his neck out, telling the *Independent’s* Alexandra Pollard in January 2020, “Yeah, I said #MeToo is a witch hunt. I really feel there were a lot of people, decent people, or mildly irritating people, who were getting hammered. That’s wrong. I don’t like mob mentality. These were ambitious adults.”

Challenged by Pollard that white men “are born with certain privileges that, too often, they exploit,” Gilliam responded with a rebuke to racial and gender stereotyping: “I don’t like the term black or white. I’m now referring to myself as a melanin-light male. I can’t stand the simplistic, tribalistic behaviour that we’re going through at the moment.”

A glimpse into the subjective and vindictive climate in major arts organisations has been provided in recent days by members of the Old Vic 12, young beneficiaries of a scheme that “provides access and insights into top-level theatre-making, mentoring from industry experts” and “paid opportunities to collaborate with each other to create brand new work.”

Scheme beneficiary Nassy Konan tweeted last Friday to welcome *Into the Woods’s* cancellation, “This should have been scrapped over a year ago, but it’s taken them this long to do something right for ONCE.”

Not to be outdone, her colleague Penny Babakhani tweeted, “Good. It should have been cancelled over a year ago. And the leadership at the Old Vic who owe many of us an apology for the awful, awful way this was handled.”

Their statements conjure an image of Gilliam’s animated Monty Python boot, stamping on the banished production, squashing its cast, crew and audience members underfoot.

Have Babakhani and Konan, in their rush to dispense with “the old guard,” even stopped to consider the implications of cancelling an entire theatrical production based on the personal views and opinions of a given director or producer? Who will be next? And how can young theatre practitioners learn anything if 80-year-old veterans of stage and screen are to be cancelled, with all that this implies for their future work and legacy?

Powerful social and economic interests are at work. The Old Vic reportedly cancelled *Into the Woods* despite warnings it may face legal action. It is also refunding £300,000 in ticket sales for the musical that was due to open a three-month run next April. The *Telegraph* reported on Tuesday, “The London

theatre ~~had~~ ~~cancelled~~ ~~Sondheim’s~~ *Into the Woods* to survive 2022.”

The Old Vic’s role in the #MeToo witch-hunt of actor Kevin Spacey in 2017 looms large in all of this. Spacey was artistic director at the Old Vic from 2003-2015, his tenure widely acclaimed a triumph. He lured some of the biggest names in acting and directing to the theatre. In the (2015) words of the *Guardian’s* theatre critic Michael Billington, Spacey had, through his tireless work and advocacy, “rescued a theatre that looked as if it might be heading for oblivion and given the Old Vic a civic purpose even without a penny of public subsidy.”

But then came Spacey’s #MeToo moment. In October 2017, actor Anthony Rapp accused Spacey of making inappropriate advances to him some 30 years previously. Two days later, Spacey was accused of groping then-18-year-old William Little, late at night in a Nantucket, Massachusetts bar and restaurant in July 2016. Two years later the case collapsed, with Little refusing to testify about a key piece of exculpatory evidence. The WSWS described the sordid outcome as “a blow to the #MeToo sexual witch-hunt .”

The Old Vic’s contribution to Spacey’s destruction came with an investigation, in October-November 2017, into 20 anonymous allegations of “inappropriate” behaviour during his tenure at the theatre.

Law firm Lewis Silken took just two weeks to issue findings, with the Old Vic concluding, “it has not been possible to verify any of these allegations.” It added, “With the exception of one of the claims, none of the reported incidents were raised formally or informally with management.” The Old Vic thanked those who had provided information against Spacey via its “helpline” and pledged the anonymity of his accusers would be respected along with the content of the alleged “inappropriate behaviour.”

Despite the lack of evidence against Spacey, the Old Vic gave blanket credence to his accusers, “For those who were affected during Kevin’s tenure, our victim support counselling service will continue to be open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for the next 12 months.”

Gilliam’s production of *Into the Woods* is currently in search of a venue. He is no stranger to censorship. *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979) had its funding pulled by EMI just days before production (George Harrison famously stepped in), and screenings were banned in several countries. More than four decades later, the senior management team at Britain’s leading independent not-for-profit theatre have themselves become chief censors, basing themselves on the anti-democratic, irrationalist theories of gender and identity politics. Their actions can only play into the hands of the far right.



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