

Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre cancels *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adaptation over Gaza references

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The Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester has cancelled director Stef O'Driscoll's five-week run of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an appalling act of political censorship. The modern take on the play, featuring a drum and bass soundtrack, was cancelled after last-minute demands by management that a song containing the phrase "Free Palestine" and referencing transgender rights be removed.

Director and cast opposed the attempted interference, refused to back down, and management cancelled the show.

The production, inspired by Manchester's rave scene, was to have marked the Royal Exchange debut of acclaimed director O'Driscoll, former Interim Artistic Director at The Gate theatre. Her adaptation included original music by local artist Salo, who was to have appeared as the Moon. It was scheduled to run from first previews on September 6 until October 12.

The production transforms Shakespeare's mechanicals into rappers in the city's drum and bass world. The final scene of the adaptation features a rap from Snug including references to "ceasefire now," genocide and "mass bloodshed." Performed on a set containing a car with "free Palestine" graffiti. The song, involving the audience, also went on to mention transgender rights.

This had been worked out through weeks and weeks of rehearsals and development. Theatre management intervened only at the first internal preview, on September 6.

The Royal Exchange last year moved away from having an Artistic Director responsible for productions to having a corporate creative director. This leaves productions employing freelance artists more susceptible to last-minute political interference and censorship.

Previews are public performances ahead of official opening and before press viewing. They allow final adjustments and improvements to the production, allowing for the final live realisation of the production process. At the Exchange, however, the theatre management "really got suddenly interested" in the show and demanded the cutting

of material integral to it till then. O'Driscoll rejected the cuts, telling the theatre that if they wanted them they would have to make them themselves, and they would need to tell the company themselves.

Taking a principled stand, her company backed her. The cast were "very solid and unified," in the words of one insider. That source told the *Manchester Evening News* that O'Driscoll responded to management: "This is my direction, it's what it's always been, we've had weeks and months and you are now trying to change it after the first preview."

Censorship and interference began straightaway. Performances were cancelled and postponed, with various excuses offered. Management cancelled the first public preview saying a cast member was injured and there was no available understudy. They then informed ticketholders the September 10 show was cancelled because of "technical difficulties." The next day they postponed the rest of the week's performances over "ongoing" issues.

Management met the company on the morning of what should have been the press night. With O'Driscoll and her company sticking to their guns, the Exchange cancelled the whole run on September 14, citing "a number of issues."

The Exchange seem to have cut their losses immediately, with a commitment to pay crew for the entire contract at a cost of tens of thousands of pounds. Trade paper *The Stage* asked what this might mean for a theatre still recovering from COVID lockdowns, when it risked losing up to two-thirds of its permanent staff.

Actors' union Equity said it was pleased no one would be out of pocket, but "the issues that have led to the cancellation... require further discussion." The union called for "an urgent meeting to discuss the reasons for cancellation."

Preposterously, in light of the censorship it was demanding, the Exchange claimed that "we want to work with artists who address complex issues." Actor Giovanni

Bienne commented on X/Twitter: “Every director worth their salt who wants to address ‘complex issues’ will laugh and spit in the @rxtheatre’s face whenever they try to hire them.”

The theatre blamed cancellation on “a number of challenges,” including “a delayed technical week and changes late in the process.” These “changes” were presumably the ones they could not force on the company. Cancelling, the Exchange said, “Every effort was made to get the show on.” This suggests only that they made every effort to pressure O’Driscoll and company into the cuts.

There is a growing refusal to bow to political censorship under conditions where it is being pushed ever more aggressively. As a source told local press regarding O’Driscoll, “As far as she was concerned, it was all part of the scene she was setting. It isn’t about Palestine and it’s not about trans rights. It’s about a sub-culture and the world we are in.”

It is not just that references to the real world are under attack. Any mention of the Israeli state’s genocidal onslaught on the Palestinian people is coming under pressure from pro-Zionist corporate and lobbying groups. Artists for Palestine said the Exchange has “serious questions to answer with regards to transphobic and anti-Palestinian racist censorship.”

Cast, crew and director are reported to be furious, with O’Driscoll described as “ground down” by the attack. On Instagram, Salo wrote, “The work I put into this was huge and I’m f***** gutted for myself and everyone involved. Don’t wanna talk about it too much as I’m emotionally drained but will answer any questions about it at a later date. Just need some time to process.”

After meeting the theatre, Equity reported frustration at the “lack of transparency” around the cancellation. The union pledged to fight for “artistic integrity” and “freedom of expression,” writing, “We reject the growing culture of censorship created by funders and pressure groups.”

Some of the response from theatre practitioners has been to criticise the Exchange’s replacement of the Artistic Director with a creative director. *The Stage* described it as “absolutely extraordinary” that management might only find out about the creative content of a project days before press night.

But this is only a secondary factor in the wider drive towards political censorship of artistic expression. It acts as a deterrent to freelance artists interested in politically engaged work. As Bienne commented, “Working there will make you an establishment stooge. And who wants that reputation.”

Equity General Secretary Paul W. Fleming said that the show “was definitely pulled in the context of an artistic

dispute about some of the political messaging within it.” He noted an increase in this over the last year, “but actually increasingly over the last 15 years.”

Censorship and the suppression of critical voices plays an ever-bigger part in funding. The Exchange receives £2.4 million a year from Arts Council England (ACE), the body’s third-highest grant after the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company.

One of its other main funders, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, reported being “in conversation” with the theatre “to better understand the situation.” ACE similarly said all its funding recipients “remain fully responsible for their operations, artistic programme, and the day-to-day management of their activities.”

In January this year, ACE revised its Relationship Framework policy guidelines to state that “overtly political or activist” statements might create “reputational risk” and possibly threaten funding arrangements. They warned funded bodies against “artistic and creative output that might be deemed controversial... and goes beyond your company’s core purpose.”

Facing pushback against this threat of censorship by funding cuts, ACE rewrote the guidance, claiming to champion “freedom of artistic expression.” ACE now say their guidelines are “intended to support artistic freedom, by helping organisations identify, plan for, and respond to risks; avoid self-censorship; and tackle difficult subjects with clarity and confidence.”

They wrote that they “will not remove or refuse funding to an organisation or an individual purely because they make work that is political.” *The Stage* asked, “Despite ACE’s insistence that this was not intended to encourage self-censorship, is it being interpreted differently by funded organisations?”

To ask the question is to answer it.

References to the genocidal policies of the Israeli government express a growing anger and concern among layers of artists and performers who cannot stay silent at the world around them. This reflects the disgust of broad layers of the working class internationally. The response of governmental cultural authorities is to seek ways of silencing them.



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