

Britain: Sikh protests force closure of play

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Birmingham Repertory Theatre has cancelled its production of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* (Dishonour), after violent demonstrations by Sikh groups forced the evacuation of the theatre. The cancellation, described by Shami Chakrabarti of the human rights organisation Liberty as "censorship through intimidation," represents a serious blow to freedom of artistic expression and sets a dangerous precedent.

Representatives of local Sikh temples had been in negotiations with the theatre prior to the demonstrations becoming violent. They were calling for changes to the play, which they said offended their religion. They have received support from other religious groups.

The Saturday, December 18, performance was halted by an invasion of the theatre, with windows being broken and stones thrown—causing thousands of pounds worth of damage. The theatre's management subsequently announced that they were cancelling the production. Executive Director Stuart Rogers told the press, "Community leaders have been unable to guarantee to us that there will be no repeat of the illegal and violent activities we witnessed on Saturday. It is now clear that we cannot guarantee the safety of our audiences...therefore, we have decided to end the current run of the play purely on safety grounds."

Bhatti has gone into hiding after receiving threats of violence. Neal Foster of Birmingham's Old Rep Theatre, who had offered to stage the play after its cancellation by Birmingham Rep, has also received death threats. Foster withdrew the offer after discussions with Bhatti, but is hoping to organise a nationwide reading of the script.

Bhatti describes the play, her second, as a black comedy. An unmarried woman, Min, and her widowed mother Balbir live in a tower block in extremely difficult circumstances. Balbir is an abusive bully, while Min resorts to force to control her incapacitated mother. They visit the *gurdwara* (a Sikh temple), where Min seeks spiritual solace, and Balbir looks for help in finding Min a husband. They discover, though, that Balbir's husband had a homosexual affair with one of the elders before killing himself. The elder also has a history of sexually abusing young girls in the temple, and he rapes Min. When the full extent of the abuse becomes known, Balbir and one of his victims kill the elder in the temple. One critic said that, though it is billed as a black comedy, "What you'll remember is its white-hot rage."

It was the setting of the play's scenes of sexual violence in the temple that angered local Sikh elders, who initially called on Bhatti to rewrite them to take place in a community centre. Bhatti (herself a Sikh) indicated in her foreword to the play that the action was located in the *gurdwara* precisely to highlight the fact that "the simple Sikh principles of equality, compassion and modesty are sometimes discarded in favour of outward appearance, wealth and the quest for power."

It was, she said, only by "challenging fixed ideas of correct and incorrect behaviour" that "institutionalised hypocrisy" can be broken down.

More than one commentator has drawn attention to the fact that the cancellation of the production under these circumstances benefits those being criticised in the play. After the cancellation of the show, Bhatti commented, "Perhaps those who are affronted by the menace of dialogue and discussion need to be offended."

Theatre management and critics have pointed out that the play was meeting a powerful response among young Sikh women.

The theatre had gone to great lengths to emphasise that the show was not an attack on Sikhism *per se*. In a statement issued before the cancellation, the theatre explained that they had "invited the Sikh community to write a statement expressing its views. This has been given to every audience member and also read out in the auditorium before each performance."

Before the cancellation, a spokeswoman for the theatre had said, "Short of bowing to blatant censorship and cancelling the production, the Rep does not believe it could have done more to enable the community to have the freedom of speech that some of its members so clearly wish to deny the playwright."

After the cancellation, Stuart Rogers insisted, "There is nothing in this play that would incite religious hatred."

He defended the theatre's record, saying that they were not "bowing to censorship" as they had refused proposed changes to the script.

The attacks on the play have sparked a huge response. Some 700 artists have joined the cast and director of *Behzti* in signing an open letter defending free expression. (The letter, with a full list of signatories, can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,1378818,00.html>. The actors' union Equity said that "artists should have the right to express themselves freely.... [W]e don't agree with

theatrical productions being closed as a result of this kind of pressure.”

Some artists have criticised the Old Rep for cancelling the show. The director Michael Bogdanov, who in 1981 won a private prosecution for indecency brought against him by Mary Whitehouse over the play *The Romans in Britain*, called the attacks on the play “an attempt to suppress freedom of speech.” He said it was a “cowardly decision for the board of directors...to cancel this play.”

Neal Foster made his offer to continue staging the production because, he said, “I think freedom of expression is more important than health and safety.”

Many artists, recognising that the cancellation of this production has serious implications for any artistic endeavour, have sought not just to defend this particular production but also to draw wider conclusions about artistic freedom and integrity. Amber Lone, for example, wrote on the Asians in Media website (<http://www.asiansinmedia.org/>): “We object to the idea that we somehow have no right to raise issues through fiction or otherwise which are pertinent to our communities or society at large. That is the role of an artist. We may as well shut down as a society if we start to do that. It is our right to raise stories and engender debate.”

In the same forum, the filmmaker Shakila Taranum Maan, who has been outspoken in defence of Bhatti, described the role of the artist as being “to put a mirror in front of society so that we may progress rather than sweep destructive elements under the carpet.”

The writer Hanif Kureishi told the *Independent* newspaper, “[W]e have art, so people are able to say things that are challenging and that some may not want to hear.”

Nirjay Mahindru, writer with the theatre company Conspirators’ Kitchen, said the implications of the play’s cancellation were that it might mean the creation of “no-go areas” for writers. He described the cancellation as a “Christmas present” to conservative elements in British theatre, which would reinforce the “‘Bollywoodisation’ of Asian cultural expression in the British artistic landscape.”

The artistic community sees this, quite rightly, as a major threat to artistic freedom. In the Labour Party, though, both nationally and locally, they have met ambivalence and hesitation.

Khalid Mahmood, MP for Birmingham Perry Barr, said that people were free to criticise issues within Sikhism, but then sought to turn the blame for events on the artists themselves. “I feel slightly saddened that people are putting these issues across in such an insensitive way,” he said.

Arts Minister (and MP for Birmingham Yardley) Estelle Morris sought to defend “freedom of speech and artistic expression—within the law” as a “cornerstone of our democracy,” whilst at the same time praising Birmingham Rep for having withdrawn the play.

Fiona McTaggart, the Home Office Minister for Race

Equality, went further. She refused to defend either the theatre or the playwright. She insisted that the protesters were merely exercising their free speech, which “is as important as the free speech of the artist.”

McTaggart defended the hounding of a show to closure, saying, “That people feel this passionately about theatre is a good sign for our cultural life. It is a sign of a lively flourishing cultural life.”

She then claimed that the demonstrations would ultimately benefit the play and its author, as ticket sales would increase if the play were to return to the stage.

Many of the artists have placed the attack on *Behzti* in the context of the government’s discussion of a bill against incitement to religious hatred. Religious leaders have seized on this discussion to establish their own pressure-group credentials. Many of the most vociferous objections to the portrayal of the Sikh religion have come from other religious organisations. Both the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham and the Roman Catholic Archbishop have denounced the portrayal of the *gurdwara* within the play. Archbishop Vincent Nichols said that a “deliberate, *even if fictional*, violation of the sacred place of the Sikh religion demeans the sacred places of every religion” [emphasis added].

The Catholic Church is hardly a stranger to allegations of sexual abuse and violence taking place within its walls, so its support is hardly surprising.

The Commission for Racial Equality has said that *Behzti* would not have been banned under the proposed legislation. The CRE is planning a joint summit between religious groups and artists to discuss issues of freedom of expression. This will inevitably focus on calls for artists to exercise self-censorship.

Freedom of religion must also mean freedom to criticise religion, as well as freedom from religion. And some artists have already begun to see this issue in the context of a wider erosion of civil liberties. Amber Lone wrote: “[T]he general mood for debate and discussion is quashed. Our civil liberties have been corroded by Bills and Acts of Parliament which claim to be acting in the interests of our safety and are eating away at our right to exist as free citizens.... [W]e are being made to stand behind our varying ethnic and religious lines, so we are easily identifiable, easily defined and easily controlled.”



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