

UK National Youth Theatre cancels play on Syria after consulting police

Tom Scripps
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The National Youth Theatre (NYT) has shut down the production of *Homegrown*, due to have been shown in August.

The play, commissioned by the NYT, explores the reasons why three London girls, Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase, reportedly travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State (ISIS) last February, as well as the broader issue of radicalisation among a layer of Muslim youth in the UK. According to the *Guardian*, the girls are now believed to be living in the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa in Syria.

Last June Paul Roseby, NYT's artistic director, praised the play for exploring "the fears and misconceptions around Islam in this country and the obvious racism that is happening as a result of the actions of ISIS."

Until last week, Roseby had refused to explain the shift in the NYT's position or to meet *Homegrown*'s director Nadia Latif. However, an e-mail exchange between Roseby and the Arts Council that helps fund the NYT, published September 4 after a freedom of information request, confirmed why the NYT withdrew its support. Roseby wrote that the play was being pulled "to prevent any damage to NYT's reputation" and added that *Homegrown*'s producers had "failed" to meet "repeated requests for a complete chronological script to justify their extremist agenda..."

Roseby's message confirms that the NYT held a meeting with the Metropolitan Police, which they have refused to say who initiated. He wrote, "Whilst the police felt it was a valuable and important subject and supported the initiative, they rightly raised some concerns over the content with particular reference to any hate crimes and the ability for the National Youth Theatre to control all social media responses."

Did the police instigate the meeting and demand that

the NYT close down the play in order to defend the official version of these events? Both the Metropolitan police and Roseby denied that the police influenced the decision to cancel the play.

Responding to the disclosure September 8, Roseby declared, "We can categorically state that no external parties had any involvement in the decision to cancel the public presentation of *Homegrown*."

In the first week of rehearsals, the creative team were informed of a meeting between the NYT and the police. In a statement, the team said the police, "wanted" to read the final script, "attend the first three shows" and "plant plain clothes policemen in the audience" and finally carry out a "sweep with the bomb squad." The team opposed this extraordinary level of state intimidation.

Roseby expressed the real political reasons for cancelling the play, as, in his view, it was examining "where to place the hatred and blame."

In June, the play, written by Omar El-Khairi, was to be staged at Raine's Foundation Upper School in Tower Hamlets, east London. A spokeswoman for the local Labour Party council issued a statement: "The school was not aware of the subject of the play when they agreed to lease the premises. Once they became aware, they decided that it would not be appropriate to rent their premises to the National Youth Theatre."

She added, "The news of the missing schoolgirls has had a huge emotional impact on their families and friends, as well as the entire local community. Hosting this play in the heart of this community at Raine's School would be insensitive."

Finally, just a couple of weeks before the play was due to open, the NYT cancelled the production completely. They claimed *Homegrown* failed to meet its quality standards but kept this from the creative

team and the actors. The producers insisted that 70 percent of the script had already been approved by the NYT and that no quality concerns had been raised.

On August 27, theatre magazine *The Stage* interviewed Latif who said that on the day *Homegrown* was cancelled NYT producers watched “three or four” of the play’s 48 scenes and provided positive feedback. She stated, “And at 9pm the creative team all got an identical email saying the show had been cancelled—don’t come to work tomorrow, rehearsals are over, we’ll pay you in full.”

Writer El-Khairy, who had a play *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* produced at the recent Edinburgh festival, commented, “Voices have been silenced here... in order to make the decision to cancel it, something very extreme must have happened.”

He went on to explain that *Homegrown* was about having an intelligent conversation on the issue of radicalisation and expressed his anger at having been “silenced with no explanation.”

Latif said that it was “closest to self-censorship ... The theatre got burnt by a hot topic ... There are lots of ways that we are silenced—sometimes the most nefarious thing is when artists are silenced by other artists.”

Human rights organisation Liberty and the Index on Censorship have called on the NYT to explain its reasons for cancelling the play. It was joined by 19 artists, including sculptor Anish Kapoor, playwright David Hare, actor Simon Callow and Young Vic artistic director David Lan. The artists signed a letter to the *Times* by the English PEN, the founding centre of a global network opposing the suppression of freedom of expression for writers, strongly protesting the play’s cancellation.

The letter read, “We are deeply concerned by reports that the NYT may have been put under external pressure to change the location and then cancel the production.”

It continued, “We fear that government policy in response to extremism may be creating a culture of caution in the arts, if it is deemed too risky to ask difficult questions or explore sensitive topics,” and described the situation as a “troubling moment for British theatre and freedom of expression.” The artists stated, “local authorities and arts organisations have a duty to respect and protect freedom of expression.”

Guardian speaking to El-Khairy

“Particularly after that PEN letter, we had offers, both concrete and symbolic, to help us put the play back on, so I’m optimistic it can still happen. We are still hoping to do it in some form, and show what we’ve been making to people.”

He added, “This is an issue that deals with bigger issues than just the cancellation of a single play, more nuanced questions around censorship... We don’t feel like we’ve been told the whole truth. All we wanted was for the piece to be able to speak for itself.” *The Stage* cited Ramin Gray the director of *Martyr*, another play dealing with similar issues, who commented, “Given that [Latif and El-Khairy] are talented, respectable theatre makers ... I can’t believe that it’s been pulled on the grounds of quality. I think that’s totally a fig leaf for something else.”

Actors’ trade union Equity meekly said the claims of censorship, “should be taken seriously by Arts Council England, which funds the National Youth Theatre.”

As brutal austerity deepens, the ruling elite are seeking to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment in order to provide a ready-made scapegoat for social ills. On this basis, they hope to marshal support among the most reactionary layers for new wars in the Middle East and the suppression of democratic rights in the UK.

The cancellation of *Homegrown* is a disturbing development. From the facts that have come to light, it was a covert attempt to strangle a production viewed as offering a critical examination of ISIS and the Syrian conflict as a whole. ISIS, formed out of US-supported militias, was funded and armed to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad regime but has since turned against its former backers. They have exploited the destruction and deprivation brought upon the region by the United States and its European allies.

Just the chance that *Homegrown* might confront some of these issues was enough to see it censored.



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