

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

Laura Tiernan
5 November 2021

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."

