

UK arts venue HOME bans performance of Palestinian poetry and writings, *Voices of Resilience*

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HOME, one of the major arts venues in Manchester, UK, is being hit by protests after it cancelled a performance of Palestinian poetry and writings due to be held April 22.

The sold-out event was targeted by local Zionists, including the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester (JRCGM), who slandered the *Voices of Resilience* production as antisemitic. The organisation claimed that one of those due to perform, Atef Abu Saif—the Palestinian Authority’s culture minister—had engaged in antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

The event was advertised by HOME on March 25 as “celebrating Palestinian voices”. Readings would be given by, among others, Maxine Peake, the Salford-based actress with numerous credits in film, theatre and radio; Kingsley Ben-Adir who played the lead in *Bob Marley: One Love*; and the award-winning author Kamila Shamsie.

In December, Peake gave a powerful reading of a poem from Palestinian writer and artist Refaat Alareer—who had been killed by the Israel Defense Forces days earlier—at a national demonstration in London against Israel’s genocide.

Within two days of advertising the event, HOME silenced these voices, announcing on March 27 that it was a “politically neutral space committed to permitting the full range of artistic expression. Our concern for the team at HOME, our audiences and artists, and their safety is paramount. In the face of recent publicity around *Voices of Resilience*, we have cancelled the event.”

As a group of artists protesting the decision pointed out, “If political neutrality is the stance that HOME wishes to move forward with then we envision that your gallery walls will be bare, your cinema screens blank and your stages empty. Artistic expression is inherently political...”

HOME has form. Any pose of neutrality was ditched when it allowed its statue of the great revolutionary Friedrich Engels to be scrawled—as part of an installation—with anti-Russian propaganda in service to NATO’s war with the country in Ukraine. Engels, HOME boasted, had been made

“into a mouthpiece” for “Ukrainian writers and activists”.

On Saturday, roughly 1,000 people marched to HOME to protest its cowardly censorship of Palestinian voices. Joining them was the founder of Comma Press, which organised *Voices of Resilience*, Ra Page. A former journalist, Page has edited over 30 anthologies, produced and directed short films, and was included in the prestigious Bookseller 150 list in 2020.

He gave an interview to the *World Socialist Web Site*, describing HOME’s censorship as “obviously is part of a wider strategy of silencing and scaring other arts venues and art spaces into not platforming Palestinian voices or Palestinian points of view.”

Page added, “When push comes to shove, the larger [arts] organizations, the more high-profile organizations that get attacked and bullied by the Zionist lobby, they get nervous. Instantly they panic and they shut Palestinian events down. They have consistently done it. The Arnolfini in Bristol cancelled two Palestinian film festivals.”

The full six minute interview with Page can be viewed on YouTube [here](#).

An open letter in protest has been signed by more than 300 culture workers, theatre and film artists, including Peake, theatre director Pooja Ghai, the playwright Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, dramatist April De Angelis, and, a patron of HOME, Academy Award-winning director Asif Kapadia.

The letter reads, “As theatremakers, filmmakers, artists and cultural workers, many of whom have had work staged at HOME, we condemn this cowardly decision to silence the voices of Palestinians and to contribute to their erasure during an ongoing genocide.”

On Wednesday, over 70 “Exhibiting Artists from the Manchester HOME Open Exhibition 2024” sent another letter explaining, “we as a cohort have decided to withdraw our artworks from the Home Open 2024 in protest of your decision.” It added, “We hope this letter is a reminder that we as artists that are currently being represented by HOME

will not comply with this censorship and actively oppose it; we will raise our voices on behalf of those whom you have tried to silence.”

On Thursday evening a poetry vigil, Voices Unheard, will take place outside HOME in protest.

In its email prompting the ban, the JRCGM made the scurrilous claim that Atef Abu Saif is a “confirmed antisemite” and a “holocaust denier”.

Manchester -based Palestinian academic and translator Mohammed Ghalayini, who was to read Abu Saif’s poetry at the event, challenged the JRCGM to “produce the full text [in relation to Saif’s words] rather than selectively quote without context to misrepresent.”

The article in question, dated August 22, 2022, was written by Abu Saif for the *Al-Ayyam* newspaper.

Far from denying the Holocaust, he wrote, “Hitler’s crimes against humanity cannot be forgiven or tolerated. They may be unprecedented in history in terms of their ugliness... As Palestinians, this is a fact we have not denied and will never deny. We are a people who suffer injustice, massacres, killing and displacement. We cannot accept something similar that happened to others and say it is right.”

In a recent interview, Abu Saif reaffirmed his position, saying, “The Holocaust was one of the darkest moments in human history”.

Comma Press released a statement condemning the axing of the event, writing that they were “deeply concerned about the baseless and libelous allegations against one of our Palestinian writers, Atef Abu Saif, issued by the lobby group, the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester (JRC), and repeated by the *Manchester Evening News*.”

They continue, “This character assassination cannot be allowed to stand. Legal action is currently being considered with regard to the original libel and any repetition of it.”

Another Zionist who played a role in having the event cancelled was local tour guide Ed Glinert, who penned his own letter to HOME. Describing himself as a “prominent Manchester Jew,” he lied that *Voices of Resilience* was “anti-Semitic propaganda”. Echoing Conservative government propaganda, he described the protests against Israel’s slaughter of the Palestinians as “weekly hate marches” which take place in a city facing an “explosion of anti-Semitic attacks”. These marches regularly include Jewish opponents of the annihilation of Gaza.

Glinert concluded his screed: “just as we sent the anti-Semitic director of the Whitworth Art Gallery packing I’d like to see some heads roll at HOME.” This was a reference to his role in the attack on artistic freedom carried out by the Whitworth Art Gallery when it sacked its director Alistair

Hudson in 2021, following an exhibition by Forensic Architecture titled “Cloud Studies”.

Prior to Hudson’s removal, Glinert states that he contacted the Whitworth saying he would no longer provide tours around the gallery, in protest against Hudson’s reference to “human rights abuses in Gaza... part of a long history of colonial violence in which the UK is complicit.” JRCGM instructed the public “not to assume that any statement in that exhibition [Cloud Studies] is true.”

In his rant announcing his letter to HOME, Glinert referred to the “Jew-baiting Maxine Peake who I always revered as an actress and supporter of our Peterloo campaign until I discovered she liked lying about Jews.”

This is a reference to Peake’s commitment to remembering working-class history, such as the 1819 Peterloo massacre in Manchester. In 2013, as part of the Manchester International Festival, she brilliantly recited all 91 verses of *The Masque of Anarchy* by Percy Bysshe Shelley; a poem inspired by the event. She has also featured in its annual commemoration in the city and appeared in Mike Leigh’s 2018-19 film *Peterloo*, itself premiered at HOME.

These activities have earned her a broad popular following, especially in Greater Manchester, making the cancellation of *Voices of Resilience* all the more offensive. Many took to social media to express their outrage.

Interviewed by *The Stage*, Peake said she was “extremely saddened by the cancellation.” Referencing the Whitworth’s censorship, she added, “This isn’t the first time a large institution in Manchester has censored Palestinian voices and it’s setting a deeply troubling trend of silencing Palestinian art and culture.”

Across the UK and internationally, thousands of artists are speaking out against the imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza and battling against the same censorship.

Last month, hundreds occupied the Barbican centre in London after management cancelled a lecture in February due to be given by well-known Indian writer Pankaj Mishra, entitled “The Shoah [Nazi holocaust] After Gaza.” Many artists withdrew their work from the venue in protest.



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