

UK arts centre HOME forced to reverse censorship of Palestinian event after protests

Robert Stevens
5 April 2024

Following a week of protests, HOME, one of Britain's major arts venues, has been forced to reinstate the production, *Voices of Resilience: Celebration of Gazan Writing*. The Manchester event had been cancelled on March 27 in a cowardly capitulation to pressure from local Zionist backers of Israel's Gaza genocide.

Originally scheduled for April 22, *Voices of Resilience* was due to feature readings of Palestinian writings from acclaimed actors Maxine Peake and Kingsley Ben-Adira, award-winning author Kamila Shamsie, and others.

On Thursday afternoon, eight days after the ban, HOME announced its climbdown, saying its "initial cancellation of the *Voices of Resilience* event was a difficult decision for HOME" and adding, "we recognise that there is work to be done now, to restore the well-earned confidence that our audiences and artists have always held in HOME... We stand with all innocent victims of this conflict, and call for a humanitarian solution."

The decision by HOME to reinstate the production is a political victory over the supporters of Israel's war on the Palestinians, and the attempts of Zionists to silence opposition by levelling bogus allegations of antisemitism.

Among the readings that were listed in the initial publicity for the event was *Don't Look Left*, a new diary of the genocide by Atef Abu Saif—the Palestinian Authority's culture minister. Readings from the work of those killed by Israel's war machine, including Refaat Alareer and Hiba Abu Nada, were also planned.

The event, initially announced on March 25, was already sold-out by March 27 when the Jewish Representative Council of Greater Manchester (JRCGM) wrote to HOME, Manchester City Council, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester to denounce *Voices of Resilience* as antisemitic. The JRCGM demanded, "This event must be cancelled."

HOME immediately cancelled the event, claiming it was "politically neutral" and citing its concern for the safety of "the team at HOME, our audiences and artists."

JRCGM falsely stated that "Atef Abu Saif, the Palestinian Authority Minister of Culture... has engaged in shocking and antisemitic Holocaust denial" and risked "increasing antisemitism against the Jewish community." The organisers of the production, Comma Press, threatened legal action against this libel.

Another letter demanding censorship of Palestinian voices and hurling slanders of "antisemitism" had been sent by local tour guide Ed Glinert. Following HOME's initial move to ban *Voices of Resilience*, Glinert was cock-a-hoop, declaring on social media, "Success! [HOME] have cancelled the Jew-baiting programme of events. I put it down to my letter."

Not so fast.

While the Zionists can rely on the backing of the major imperialist powers and the corporate media to sanction the war crimes being unleashed against a defenceless population by the Israel Defence Forces, a far more powerful force—millions of workers and youth in Britain and hundreds of millions internationally—oppose them. The mass movement against the Gaza genocide which has erupted globally over the last six months has had more than enough of the big lie that opposition to the fascistic policies of the Israeli government is antisemitism.

This is why HOME's decision to ban *Voices of Resilience* met an immediate and forceful popular backlash. Last Saturday, around 1,000 protesters marched through Manchester as part of the weekly protests against Israel's genocide, choosing to end with a rally in Tony Wilson Square outside HOME's building.

Many thousands of artists in Britain and internationally stand in solidarity with and have been emboldened by this movement and are taking a stand against the censorship of pro-Palestinian views. Close to 600 culture workers,

theatre and film artists signed an open letter demanding *Voices of Resilience* be reinstated—among them Peake, HOME patron and Academy Award-winning director Asif Kapadia, theatre director Pooja Ghai, playwright Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, and dramatist April De Angelis.

On Wednesday, over 70 “Exhibiting Artists from the Manchester HOME Open Exhibition 2024” joined the fightback with 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.”

The artists involved acted on their pledge within hours, with around 100 going en masse to HOME on Wednesday evening, taking around 70 of their artworks off gallery walls, and stating that more would be taken away in the coming days. Bringing a large banner reading “HOME MANCHESTER—Stop Censoring Palestinians”, the artists replaced their works with copies of a statement calling for an apology from HOME and the reinstatement of *Voices of Resilience*. A video of the art works being removed from HOME can be viewed in this *Guardian* article.

Freya Wysocki, one of those involved in the removal of their work, told the *Manchester Evening News*, “Many Manchester artists are deeply upset about HOME’s decision to cancel ‘Voices of Resilience’ and we are removing our art pieces to support the event producers and more importantly to support the Palestinian people whose stories must be told.”

Even after HOME reinstated the event, a further protest with hundreds in attendance took place outside its building Thursday evening, despite the pouring rain. Titled *Voices Unheard*, the one hour event heard poems with the aim of “amplify[ing] the voices that need to be heard”.

A speaker at the event said to cheers, “We know the only reason that HOME changed their decision was because of our protests... and also the artists who withdrew their work yesterday”. He added, “We know that the staff at HOME, in their huge numbers, were against that decision [to cancel *Voices of Resilience*]”.

The organiser of the production issued a statement reading in part:

of Resilience welcome HOME’s decision to reinstate the event. This is a potential watershed moment in the campaign against the intimidation that arts venues face for showcasing Palestinian artists and voices.

“We want to express our solidarity with HOME staff.

“For all of us involved in the showing of this work it has been a distressing time, on top of the news we are seeing from Gaza and the ongoing genocide being committed against Palestinian people. We’ve been deeply moved and overwhelmed by the solidarity shown to us by the artist community in Manchester, whose actions in protest and support of *Voices of Resilience* stand as a testament to the strength of our collective voice.

“We hope that other venues and institutions can initiate fresh conversations with artists, speakers, and creators whose work has previously been sidelined or cancelled. We believe this is a critical step towards upholding values of artistic expression and inclusivity.”

Events at HOME are an indication that the tide is turning against the Zionist witch-hunters of opponents of the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide. This week, a YouGov poll found that 59 percent of UK voters believed that Israel is violating human rights in Gaza, with just 12 percent to the contrary. A majority of 56 percent to 17 percent against favoured a UK ban on the export of arms and spare parts to Israel.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

“Comma Press and the producers behind Voices