

**Research paper by Simon Harris  
2005/2006 Wales Fellow on The Clore Leadership Programme**

**Title:**

**Casting the Audience:  
Issues around Faith, Freedom and Funding in the Arts**

Supervisor:  
Professor Sara Selwood  
Head of Cultural Policy and Management  
City University London

Completed: August 2007

### Abstract:

Post-war arts policy in the United Kingdom was informed by attitudes about totalitarianism. The development of an “arm’s length” principle in state funding of the arts was intended to bolster artistic freedom. However, as the legal power of government to patrol artistic expression diminished and censorship of the theatre was abandoned, a new form of constraint began to emerge driven by technological shifts and conservative religion. In societies that are increasingly multi-cultural, artistic expression and religious sensibility have been in uncomfortable proximity. In turn, this has created challenges for governments driven by instrumentality and the need to be inclusive and representative. Having presented some background to these developments, this paper offers case studies of the controversies surrounding Birmingham Rep’s production of *Behzti* by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti in 2004 and The Royal Court Theatre’s touring production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, which played in New York in 2006. In each case, the paper explores the dynamic relationship between religious groups, artistic freedom and government policy. Beyond these polarities, however, the paper attempts to distinguish the ability of each controversy to slip between a variety of other contingent issues such as race, gender, economics and local politics. Finally, the paper begins to re-frame arguments about free speech, self-restraint and offence in the theatre by arguing against assumptions about universality and in favour of a conscious emphasis by theatre-makers on how they address and relate to audiences.

### Keywords:

arm’s length ◦ censorship ◦ religion ◦ multi-culturalism ◦ *Behzti* ◦ Royal Court Theatre ◦ offence ◦ audiences

## The End of Censorship

In 1946, the founding Chair of the newly-created Arts Council of Great Britain was the economist, John Maynard Keynes – a man who spoke of The Arts Council being necessary “to protect artists from government.”

The concept underlying protection for artists grew from recognition of the financial hardship that artists were suffering. Further to wartime provision and the co-option of writers, film-makers and other artists into the war-effort through such organisations as The Ministry of Information, The Council for The Encouragement of Music and The Arts, the BBC Third Programme and Artists for War, there was a widespread understanding within the intellectual and political elite that the post-war economy would require a period of state support for the arts, similar to the reconstruction required in other areas.<sup>1</sup> Keynes himself felt that this support would be temporary and that, as economic problems receded, “the heart and head will be occupied... by our real problems... of life and human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the persecution of artists by totalitarian regimes before and during the War, however, not all artists felt benignly towards ideas of state protection. Edward Sackville-West was not alone in warning against the vulnerability of artists to state “dogmatism,”<sup>3</sup> which was felt widely to be a very real threat. Nevertheless, influential figures, such as Cyril Connolly, prevailed with the argument that the need outweighed the danger: “The artist who declares truly for individual freedom, aesthetic spirit or intellectual truth must be prepared to go once more into the breach against the Soviet view... All we can see is that it does not happen here.”<sup>4</sup>

Far from being a temporary condition, however, state funding of the arts continued and multiplied, albeit under the relative security of Keynes’ “arms’ length principle.” Initially answering directly to The Treasury, Keynes’ personal influence meant that The Arts Council retained a certain autonomy. However, this autonomy, focussed as it was on a handful of elite art forms and the metropolitan centre of London, also resonated as personal patronage. For example, in 1946, most of the available government funding was committed to transforming Covent Garden from a public dance hall run by Mecca into an international ballet and opera house. Of course, the chairman of the opera house was none other Keynes himself.

By the mid-Sixties, the Wilson government was spear-heading a different approach. In 1964, Harold Wilson appointed Jennie Lee as the first Arts Minister for the United Kingdom and, simultaneously, brought The Arts Council under the aegis of The Department of Education and Science.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Sinfield, A. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*. Continuum 2004 (pp. 55-56)

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, H. *Culture Gap: Experience of Government and the Arts*. Boyars, 1979 (p.41)

<sup>3</sup> Connolly, C. *Ideas and Places*. Weidenfeld, 1953. (p. 113)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* (pp.135-36)

Underlying this restructure was a set of assumptions about the wider value of the arts as a cohesive force in society and their ability to play a role in the quality of life for the under-privileged. Labour's manifesto in 1966 regarded, "access for all to the best of Britain's cultural heritage" as a "hallmark of a civilized country".<sup>5</sup> And so, following on from Lee's landmark White Paper *A Policy for The Arts – The First Steps*, there was a considerable increase in investment as part of Wilson's modernising agenda. According to Laurence Black:

*"ACGB expenditure "mushroomed during the 1960s, increasing by nearly 500 % in real terms". The 1965-66 ACGB report talked of a shift from subsistence to growth. The ACGB grant grew from £3.205 million in 1964-65 to £9.3 million by 1970-71. In 1965, The 'Housing the Arts' fund established in 1965 more than trebled by 1969/70. Only 40 % of government arts spending went to the ACGB in 1967/68 – most flowed directly to the national museums and galleries. Total spending increased most sharply in 1966-67 by 45 %, celebrated by Lee as "the biggest increase in state subsidy this country has ever known".<sup>6</sup>*

At the same time, however, the "civilising" impact that the arts were supposed to achieve heralded the beginnings of a quid pro quo. Arnold Goodman, Chair of The Arts Council of Great Britain between 1965 and 1972, outlined the nature of this implicit contract when he said:

*"I believe that there is a crucial state in the country at this moment. I believe that young people lack values, lack certainties, lack guidance; that they need something to turn to; and need it more desperately than they have needed it at any time in our history – certainly, at any time which I can recollect. I do not say that the arts will furnish a total solution... (but) I believe that once young people are captured for the arts they are redeemed from many of the dangers which are accompanying the attention of the government in a completely unprofitable and destructive fashion."<sup>7</sup>*

Through the use of the words "captured" and "redeemed," Goodman was hinting at the holy mission of social control he believed the arts were capable of achieving, which also, perhaps, speaks readily to the kind of interests and concerns he had needed to assuage. Indeed, Goodman played a strong part in a period that is defined by its liberal and reforming character.

The post-war reality was one of rapid change. The embrace of mass consumerism and innovations, such as The National Health Service and the welfare state, gave rise to a broadening of aspiration and a new set of

---

<sup>5</sup> Labour Party Archives: Labour Party, *Lets Go* 18.

<sup>6</sup> Black, L. *The Creative Industries and Cultural Politics in Britain from the 1960s to Cool Britannia* in *Cultural Industries: The British Experience in International Perspective*. 2006 (Available: <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de>.)

<sup>7</sup> Lord Goodman in The House of Lords, 19 April 1967: See S. Craig *The Bitten Hand in Dreams and Deconstructions* ed. S. Craig. Amber Lane 1980 (p.180)

social relationships. Popular culture strongly reflected the change in attitudes of ordinary people, particularly in relation to the family and to sexual behaviour. During the late 1960's a number of legal reforms passed through Parliament, relaxing restrictions on divorce, contraception and abortion, and with limited reforms for homosexuality:

*"The 1950's and 1960's witness the cumulative removal of customary and legal restraints on certain forms of sexual behaviour, and upon their public portrayal in print or by the visual arts or for commercial purposes. Legal restrictions on the freedom of married people to escape from the bonds which used to be defended as essential safeguards for the integrity of monogamous marriage have been relaxed, and the sexual freedom of men and women has been enlarged."*<sup>8</sup>

In this context, censorship was increasingly an anachronism. Censorship against publications was tested on several occasions – the 1960 case against D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* achieving a landmark status. However, theatre was regulated by a specific law – The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 – which required compliance in advance of the event itself. By regulating theatre in the pre-production period, the Act ensured that approval from The Lord Chamberlain's Office was essential before it could even be presented to the public. Prohibition was allowed "whenever he (The Lord Chamberlain) shall be of opinion that it is fitting for the Preservation of good Manners, Decorum or of the Public Peace."<sup>9</sup> The architects of the Act, such as Sir Robert Walpole, and those that exercised its powers would, no doubt, have approved Plato's notion of the place of art in society as "an adjunct of state policy, an instrument for the shaping of good citizens in accord with approved morality."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it may even have been supported by the likes of Arnold Goodman. However, the state-sanctioned morality of the time was founded in and governed by The Church of England. Thus, its ideological foundations were laid down in the principle that theatre was intended to reflect an idealised and conventionally moral view of society, avoiding any serious questioning of orthodox values and contemporary political issues. As much a bulwark against free speech, its utility was as a paternalistic bastion under-pinning privilege and vested interest.

Even as part of a reforming agenda within the then Labour government, the demise of theatre censorship was by no means certain. Opposition sprang from unexpected sources.<sup>11</sup> When it was debated at cabinet level, The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, spoke out of his fear that without censorship British theatre would do damage to the "public interest" and proposed strict limits to the legislation. Despite the support of Richard Crossman, Wilson later conceded that "the general feeling of ministers was to let everything go free." However, Wilson still held on to one caveat, which would have amounted, in practice, to a drastic extension of

---

<sup>8</sup> Finer, M. *Finer Report on One Parent Families Vol. 1* 1974. HMSO.

<sup>9</sup> Stephens, J.R. *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* 1980 (p.10)

<sup>10</sup> Plato *The Republic* 1987 Penguin Classics (pp.421-439)

<sup>11</sup> De Jongh, N. *Politics, Prudery and Perversions*. Methuen. 2001. (pp.1-17)

the law – that the representation of “the living and the recently dead” should be prohibited. In his view, there had to be “safeguards against the theatre being used deliberately to discredit or create political hostility to public figures.” In other words, the theatre, specifically, was too dangerous a place to allow free speech within the general law, but that a system of checks and balances amounting to additional restraint was required. In this Wilson was keenly supported by The Lord Chamberlain’s Office and, presumably, the Queen. However, by 1968, James Callaghan had lent his weight to arguments first put forward by his predecessor as Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, and Wilson’s objection was withdrawn in the face of increasingly untenable conflict over the censorship of stage productions. Against the background of controversy surrounding Edward Bond’s play *Early Morning* and the musical *Hair*, The Theatres Act became law in September 1968. The state’s censorship of theatre in Great Britain was brought to an end.

## The Return of The Repressed

A characteristic anxiety of the 1960's and beyond was the feeling of being deluged by social forces beyond the control of government. As Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher wrote off the entire period as one swamped by "permissive claptrap" with traditional virtues of "discipline and self-restraint put in abeyance by the youth generation."<sup>12</sup> One of the most vocal campaigners against "blasphemy, bad language, violence and indecency"<sup>13</sup> was Mary Whitehouse, whose National Viewers' and Listeners' Association was launched in 1965 and, at one time, operated with over 400,000 members. Primarily aimed at broadcasting and the mass media, Whitehouse also made high-profile attempts to legally suppress *Gay News*, which she successfully convicted of blasphemous libel in 1977, and, unsuccessfully, the theatre director, Michael Bogdanov, for "procuring an act of gross indecency" as part of the production of *Romans In Britain* by Howard Brenton at The National Theatre in 1980.

Whitehouse's attempts at private prosecution were motivated by frustration at the increasingly secular nature of British society, where pluralistic values were taking the place of Christian absolutes. With the end of censorship, the general law of the land was deemed sufficient to suppress forms of conduct or behaviour that could be identified as harmful to the well-being of a significant number of individuals. Whitehouse's intention was to test how far this principle could be pursued through the courts, as she believed the state lacked the will to do so and that there were too many vested interests on the liberal-left. However, in doing so, Whitehouse had to become increasingly inventive with her interpretation of the law in order to achieve her ends. Bogdanov recounts this himself:

*"First of all, Mary Whitehouse was refused permission to prosecute under the Theatres Act. Then she was refused permission under The Obscene Publications Act. And she found a loophole in the 1956 Homosexual Offences Act... which was to forbid soliciting in public lavatories. And what she did was she applied that law to me as the pimp, as the arranger of the scene, so I was personally prosecuted."<sup>14</sup>*

The accusation of "procuring an act of gross indecency" was, in effect, an accusation that Bogdanov had employed two actors deliberately to perform a sexual act. Despite a farcical aspect to the case, the threat to Bogdanov's liberty was very real. Geoffrey Robertson QC, who was junior defence counsel to Lord Hutchinson, recalled that, during the committal hearings at Horseferry Road magistrates court, "a serious fight was required even to get bail for Bogdanov. The judge was minded to keep him in the cells."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Guardian* March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1982

<sup>13</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/763998.stm>

<sup>14</sup> Bogdanov, M. *Interview transcript* July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>15</sup> Lawson, M. *Passion Play: The Guardian* October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

However, the case eventually fell apart in unsatisfactory circumstances, when it was revealed in court that what appeared to have been an actor's penis to Graham Ross-Cornes, Mary Whitehouse's solicitor and her only witness in the case, was, in fact, his thumb. Nevertheless, the judge found that the 1956 Sexual Offences Act could be applied to theatre; thereby removing hopes that the case might be dismissed due to the failure to distinguish between a representation and an act. Consequently, there is still legal precedent for the view that theatre is subject to the Sexual Offences Act and criminal law in general.

Beyond the ambivalence of The Attorney General, Michael Havers QC, at the time, there was also an undoubtedly political element to the proceedings. As Lawson points out:

*"While Bogdanov prepared the production, there occurred what now seems to have been a crucial interlude. Howard Brenton co-wrote a vicious skit on Thatcherism for the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Initially called Ditch the Bitch (until objections from feminist theatre-workers caused a change of title to A Short Sharp Shock), the production infuriated Sir Horace Cutler, Tory leader of the Greater London Council, who protested at the staging of such work at a theatre partly funded by the GLC. The then Arts minister, Norman St John Stevas, apologised to the House of Commons for the public funding of such a production. It was against this background that The Romans in Britain began rehearsal in September 1980."<sup>16</sup>*

Bogdanov agrees that there was a calculatedly political aspect to what followed. On the second preview there was a mass walkout by forty Greater London Council councillors after which Cutler informed a journalist from *The Daily Mirror* that his wife had been forced to "cover her head" during the sodomy scene and that, if the National wanted to keep its council cash, it should take off the "so-called play" at once.<sup>17</sup> Duly, Cutler sent a telegram to Sir Peter Hall, Artistic Director of The National Theatre, where he was rehearsing in New York, threatening the withdrawal of The GLC's £600,000 grant.

To this day, Bogdanov sees the entire furore as an attempt by the political establishment to exert its control and, in doing so, protect a self-serving minority:

*"It was... the extraordinary sense that the establishment has a massive cultural grip on what happens in Britain. I mean, it's something that one knows and talks about all the time, but, when you keep being confronted by examples of the way they control the thought processes and the way ideology is made by a small elite group who went to Oxbridge, it's a frightening fact of British life that... power is still vested in those old establishments."<sup>18</sup>*

---

<sup>16</sup> Lawson, M. *Passion Play: The Guardian* October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bogdanov, M. *Interview transcript* July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Whitehouse's emergence as a "public interest" campaigner, however, is perhaps more remarkable for what it tells us about the loosening and de-centring of power relationships at the time and the divergence of religious morality from the mainstream. Intriguingly, Whitehouse had a canny aptitude for organisation and an ability to capture the headlines herself. Additionally, her own relationship to "the establishment" was as ambivalent as Margaret Thatcher's, partly evidenced by a similar social background and her continuing distrust of broadcasters, who, at that time, were drawn almost exclusively from an Oxbridge elite.

Nevertheless, Whitehouse's brand of public campaigning was not unique to The United Kingdom and, in fact, had strong precedence in The United States. Growing out of Catholic and Protestant anxieties at the emergence of cinema as a popular artform in the 1920's, a reaction developed that movies were vulgar and pushing at the limits of acceptable behaviour.<sup>19</sup> Resistance came from organised collaboration between The Catholic Church and local Protestant women's groups. Initial self-regulation by the Hollywood studios was uneven and The Motion Picture Production Code, written by a Jesuit priest, was laxly enforced by the Hays Office. However, in 1933, a conference of US bishops created the Catholic League of Decency and threatened a nationwide boycott. Eventually, the studios responded by appointing Joseph Ignatius Breen, who was a tough Irish Catholic, to administer the Code. The Breen Office did so for the next twenty years and the Code was not officially abandoned until 1967, requiring scripts to follow a formula in which crime had to be punished, marriage respected and homosexuality and mixed race relationships were forbidden.

The conflict around religion and cultural production exploded in the 1980's, however, under the conservative presidencies of Ronald Reagan. As part of Reagan's utilitarian and reduced public spending agenda, cultural agencies came under closer scrutiny. A focus of controversy soon became the National Endowment for The Arts, which had been created in 1964, but had been insistently opposed early on by the likes of Strom Thurmond, the conservative senator from South Carolina. Additionally, beyond government, a variety of Christian pressure groups mobilised to counter what was perceived as moral degradation in the media. These included organisations with titles such as Focus on the Family and the Coalition for Traditional Values, as well as Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Donald Wildmon's National Federation for Decency. In 1989, Wildmon's group publicised an apparent example of blasphemy in an exhibition that had been funded by The National Endowment for The Arts. Opening at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in North Carolina, the attention of the state's senator Jesse Helms was drawn by Wildmon's group to a particular exhibit – a five-foot blow up of a plastic crucifix immersed in a Plexiglas vat of the artist's urine. The exhibit was entitled "Piss Christ" and was the work of New York-born Andre Serrano. Despite arguments by some that the exhibit achieved a profoundly religious quality, in the Senate, Helms

---

<sup>19</sup> Paglia, C. *Religion and the Arts in America in Arion – A Journal of Humanities and The Classics*. Summer 2007

fulminated against Serrano, claiming, "He is not an artist. He is a jerk."<sup>20</sup> New York Senator Alphonse D'Amato called Serrano's photo "filth" and "garbage," punctuating his remarks by tearing up the exhibition catalogue and flinging the pieces to the floor in something of an act of counter-desecration.

A similar controversy developed around the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, which was displayed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and, later, at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre. Featuring photographs representing gay and sadomasochistic activity, a furore exploded when the director of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, which was due to receive the exhibition, cancelled it instead. When it moved to Cincinnati, there were serious repercussions as police entered the gallery and charged the director with obscenity. At a later trial, the director was acquitted.

The National Endowment for The Arts became the focus over these two controversies with increasing calls for its abolition as a consequence of its financial support. However, Serrano was one of seven recipients of a \$15,000 prize from the Southeastern Center that was jointly funded by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, private donors, corporate donors and the National Endowment for The Arts. Not having commissioned the work or having any direct responsibility for it, the organisation was still deemed blameworthy for work that was offensive to certain organised religions. As a consequence of the political pressure that was generated, the organisation's budget was cut from \$171 million to \$99.5 million shortly after Congress was taken over by the Republicans in 1994. Moreover, a new obscenity clause was used to control its funding and it was forced to severely reduce the number of grants it could offer to individual artists. In 1997, it narrowly missed elimination altogether after The Senate reversed a Congress vote for its abolition and continues to be vulnerable, not least as it remains at the top of the list of government agencies that US citizens would wish to abolish.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361\\_r7.html](http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_r7.html)

<sup>21</sup> Paglia, C. *Religion and the Arts in America* in *Arion – A Journal of Humanities and The Classics*. Summer 2007

## A Burning Book

In September 1988, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was published in London by Viking/Penguin. *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, Rushdie's previous novels, had already caused riots and controversy in the Asian sub-continent, so the publishers, additionally forewarned by their own Editorial Consultant of the offence the book would provoke, were prepared for a hostile reaction. However, no-one could have predicted the extent of the controversy that followed. Protests – both peaceful and violent – took place across the world. In October, British Muslims handed over a petition with hundreds of thousands of signatures calling for the withdrawal of the novel. The book was banned in India to be followed by Bangladesh, Sudan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Venezuela. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1989, the book was burned by Muslim protesters in Bradford as part of a protest. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, whereby Rushdie was sentenced to death. Both these actions came to define the controversy in a way which has had lasting implications for the relations between Islam and the West and which in many respects was unprecedented.

Firstly, it was the first time an issue around artistic freedom had globalised to the extent that it caused an international incident and conflict between states, which had, at its source, a clash between an individual writer and a foreign government. As the essayist Eliot Weinberger said, "Rushdie is the first outlaw of the global village: the man for whom exile is not possible."<sup>22</sup> There were additional economic consequences in that several Western countries reduced their purchases of Iranian oil, froze or delayed trade negotiations, and introduced a ban on loans that deprived that country of over \$4 billion in credit.

Secondly, the controversy played a defining role in the negotiation of identity in The United Kingdom. For British Muslims, it was an opportunity to make their voice heard in a way in which they had never been heard before. As Inayat Bunglawala has written:

*"When the Iranian Islamic leader, Imam Khomeini delivered his fatwa calling for Salman Rushdie's death, I was truly elated. It was a very welcome reminder that British Muslims did not have to regard themselves just as a small, vulnerable minority; they were part of a truly global and powerful movement. If we were not treated with respect then we were capable of forcing others to respect us."*<sup>23</sup>

Previously defined in a particular stereotypical and racist context as passive, hard-working "Pakis", many Muslims were empowered by the sense that, at last, they were standing up for themselves in opposition to abuse of their religion and, by extension, their very being. Ironically, of course, this was conducted in opposition to another British Muslim, who

---

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.danielpipes.org/books/rushdiechap.php>

<sup>23</sup> Bunglawala, I. *The Guardian* June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

placed their rich experience of migration, disjuncture, prejudice and re-invention at the heart of his fiction. Meanwhile, the Thatcher government, widely perceived to be hostile to an increasingly multi-racial and diverse population, was drawn into a hesitant public dialogue with the protestors while trying to defend the rights of one Muslim against those of others on the basis of liberal democracy and free speech.

While much of the protest across the world and in the UK was peaceful, violent protest elsewhere led to loss of life. Over twenty two people died in the initial rioting, although many, as it happens, were protesters. Following on from Khomeini's *fatwa*, Rushdie's Japanese translator was stabbed to death. Two days after the *fatwa*, the novelist Anthony Burgess wrote an article for *The Independent* entitled Islam's Gangster Tactics:

*"Muslims are permitted freely to exercise their faith so long as their code of behaviour does not conflict with civil law. We want no hands cut off here. For that matter, we want no ritual slaughter of livestock, though we have to put up with it....I gain the impression that few of the protesting Muslims in Britain know directly what they are protesting against. Their Imams have told them that Mr. Rushdie has published a blasphemous book and must be punished. They respond with sheep-like docility and wolf-like aggression. They forget what the Nazis did to books - or perhaps they do not: after all, some of their co-religionists approved of the Holocaust - and they shame a free country by denying free expression through the vindictive agency of bonfires."*<sup>24</sup>

The linking of Muslims to Nazism, mindlessness and barbarism was one element in an ideological onslaught against Islam that successfully redefined British Muslims as dangerously "other" and intent on a rejection of "indigenous" British values. The tabloid newspapers of the time were characteristically vituperative and xenophobic:

*"Isn't the world getting sick of the ranting that pours non-stop from the disgusting foam-flecked lips of the Ayatollah Khomeini? Clearly this Muslim cleric is stark raving mad. And more dangerous than a rabid dog. Surely the tragedy is that millions of his misguided and equally potty followers believe every word of hatred he hisses through those yellow stained teeth. The terrifying thing is not that a lot of these crackpots actually live here among us in Britain, but that we are actually becoming frightened of them. The whole thing is crazy. And it has to stop."*<sup>25</sup>

While Rushdie eventually emerged from the protection of armed policeman to live a more or less free life once more, the event foreshadowed many of the themes and conflicts around freedom of speech and religion that were to come. Even twenty years later, after the Iranian government had distanced itself somewhat from the Khomeini *fatwa* and leading members of the Muslim Council of Great Britain had rescinded

---

<sup>24</sup> Burgess, A. *The Independent* February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> *The Daily Star* February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989.

their original views<sup>26</sup>, the knighthood received by Rushdie in 2007 served to re-ignite sensitivities. More significantly, however, a new paradigm had been established; if not the battleground for "the clash of civilisations,"<sup>27</sup> as Samuel P. Huntington has infamously proposed, it was clear that culture was unexpectedly vulnerable to its exploitation as a site of global political contest and conflict. In fact, culture, particularly after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, was increasingly the site where these tensions were to be displayed and contended.

---

<sup>26</sup> Bunglawala, I. *The Guardian* June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>27</sup> Huntington, S. P. *The Clash of Civilizations?* *Foreign Affairs Journal*. New York. 1993.

## Case Study: "Behzti"

In 2004, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti delivered a draft of her second play to The Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company, having received a successful production of her first at the same venue. The play was called *Behzti* (*Dishonour*). Set in a Sikh *gurdwara* or temple, the play tackled a variety of issues from corruption, drug abuse, domestic violence, rape and murder to mixed race relationships and paedophilia. Moreover, *Behzti* came with a warning from the playwright herself that it would cause some controversy within certain parts of the Sikh community that she belonged to.

The theatre's response was to convene a meeting between key staff, such as the General and Literary Managers, and two Sikh leaders, including Mr. Sewa Singh Mandla, who was introduced to the theatre through the Bishop of Birmingham's Inter-faith Committee. Having discussed the content of the play and that the production was already programmed, Stuart Rogers, Executive Director of Birmingham Rep, recalled that the discussion focussed on how they could "work together to minimise the impact or counter-act any negative impact there might be."<sup>28</sup> Initial discussion explored the possibility of mounting an exhibition or developing the programme further to present a contextualising account of Sikhism that would defuse any perceptions that the fiction being presented was an exclusive and infallible representation of the religion. Gradually, however, the interest in this on both sides faded. Nevertheless, the company extended an invitation to Mr. Mandla, who had never read the play, to attend an open reading early in rehearsals, which was usual practice for The Rep when working on a new play. However, Mr. Mandla was ill in hospital on the day of the reading and sent his son and a colleague along in his place. After the reading, there was a discussion with the staff at the theatre that Rogers describes as "heated",<sup>29</sup> but Janet Steel, the play's director, remembers as "not a very important do,"<sup>30</sup> although one of the men said that it was "a great" and "important" play that "should not have been set in a *gurdwara*."

Further to this, Stuart Rogers received a phone call from and then met with Gurdial Singh Atwal and Chaman Lan, two Sikh councillors on the City Council, who were furious that they had not been told about the play and, simultaneously, threatened to use their power to withdraw the council's funding from the theatre, if the play went ahead. As Stuart Rogers recalls:

*"(The Councillors) had been alerted to it by somebody from the radical section of the Sikh community and who was clearly no friend of Mr. Mandla... far from it... so clearly there was tension between sectors of the Sikh community."*<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>31</sup> Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

The situation escalated, however, to the point whereby the Leader and Chief Executive of the City Council, as well as The Arts Council, were involved, promising to resolve "internal difficulties within the Council" and remain supportive of the theatre. Finally, the theatre decided to invite Mr. Mandla, Mr. Singh Atwal, Mr. Lan and other members of the Sikh community to the first dress rehearsal of the play. Upon being informed of this development, the acting company were told that this was because complaints had been made to the council that the play was "inciting racial hatred."<sup>32</sup> Janet Steel recalled the company's shock at this:

*"A company made up of some of the finest Black and Asian actors in Britain, a Sikh playwright and myself, a mixed race director. All of us with our own struggles and stories. The thought that anyone would consider that we would have embarked upon a play that we considered to be inciting any kind of hatred, let alone racial was damn right insulting."*<sup>33</sup>

The dress rehearsal was very difficult for the company, as Steel remembers:

*"... we had to hold our dress rehearsal in front of an inquisition. Local Sikhs along with local councillors, an advisor from the local Bishop and local Arts Council officers, sat in neat rows on the left hand side of the auditorium. Management from The Rep along with the Chair of the Board sat along the back. On the right hand side sat the creative team. I huddled up close to the lighting designer so that I could whisper notes in his ear, it gave me a false sense of security. Gurpreet sat in front of us and the designer behind. The actors were unhappy about having to 'perform' during a dress rehearsal, but just like the rest of us, they were powerless to refuse... It's hard to describe how I felt – it was like having an audience made up of all the critics that had ever said a non-supportive word about your work. To top it all, there was the fear that these critics had the power, not only to give us a bad review but also to stop the play from opening."*<sup>34</sup>

After the dress rehearsal, a group of men, including one of the councillors, made their way towards Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. Speaking in Punjabi, they spoke and acted aggressively towards her. In a version that others have corroborated, Rogers recalls that:

*"They were very angry at the end, indeed, and... did physically attack Gurpreet... and had to be separated from Gurpreet."*<sup>35</sup>

This continued into the theatre foyer in a similar vein. After the argument, it was agreed that, in recognition of the distress the play was causing to some members of the Sikh community, a statement written by the

---

<sup>32</sup> Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>33</sup> Steel, J. *Index on Censorship* 2005

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

protestors would be made available to the audience and read at the beginning of each performance by the theatre's Front of House Manager. The play opened the next day without incident and, in Stuart Roger's view, "seemed to work." However, Steel, who strongly emphasises how funny the play is, felt that the effect of the statement to the audience was to "kill the opening of the play."

Outside of the auditorium, the initial demonstrations were peaceful. Rogers was becoming anxious about protestors inside the theatre foyer handing out their own copies of the statement, but the acting company spoke cordially to them each night and the situation, in Steel's view, was "amicable." By the Thursday, however, it was becoming difficult for the theatre to control the protests, especially inside the building. A protest by thirty to forty chanting demonstrators began in the foyer, before there was an attempt to break into the auditorium and disrupt a performance. Two or three people were arrested after the police had read The Riot Act.

By the Saturday, the theatre was aware that the concerted campaign against the play was coming to a head. Led by the city councillors, it was being orchestrated through e-mails, telephone calls and buses that were hired to bring protestors from around the country to the venue. Among the protestors, *The Times* reported that there was a strong presence by members of the extremist Sikh Federation – an offshoot of a separatist group called the International Sikh Youth Federation that had been previously banned under the Terrorism Act of 2000 for its involvement in assassinations, bombings and kidnappings in India<sup>36</sup>.

An actor in the play, Madhav Sharma, described the intimidating atmosphere:

*"Groups of young men were standing around in balaclavas and black gloves. There were some in orange turbans – I have since been told that they believe in a separate nation state for Sikhs. There were men openly wearing long swords, admittedly in their sheaths, contributing to the atmosphere of intimidation. There were older men in black or blue turbans rushing around talking into mobile telephones. There were elderly men in white turbans and beards, on both sides of the barricades, some with video cameras, and there was orchestrated, rhythmic chanting. Soon eggs and other objects were being thrown at the theatre building."*<sup>37</sup>

In an interesting reflection of the Rushdie affair, Inderjit Singh of *The Sikh Messenger* newspaper later blamed the build up of pressure and the violence on the fact that the protest was not being listened to:

*"The level of protest did not surprise me. This has been building up over a few weeks, they were protesting and not being heeded."*<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *The Times* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

<sup>37</sup> Sharma, M. *A View From Inside in Free Expression Is No Offence*. Penguin Books. 2005

<sup>38</sup> *The Guardian* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004.

On the Saturday evening, a group of two or three hundred gathered and were protesting noisily. There was a substantial police presence standing by, security guards in the theatre and barriers to restrain the crowd. As the performance was due to begin, rocks were thrown from the back of the crowd through the glass windows at the front of the theatre, which were shattered. This was the cue for the main group at the front to break through the barriers and charge the building, while a second group armed with clubs broke through the stage door. While the actors locked themselves in dressing rooms, the protestors smashed television screens, computer control equipment and, ultimately, broke into the theatre where they vandalised the *Behzti* set and props. It then took three or four hours for the police to restore order and three or four people were subsequently arrested. Amardeep Bassey, a Sikh reporter present on the night, noted that the demonstration refused to disperse until the police agreed to release the arrested protestors without charge.<sup>39</sup>

On Monday 20 December, the theatre met with the police to discuss the situation. Significantly, the police position had changed from support of the theatre's right to perform the play to a warning that they did not have sufficient resources to prevent a further incident on the same scale and were not able to guarantee protection for The Rep's staff or audience. In response, The Rep decided to end the play's run early and cancel the remaining performances. Speaking to the press, Stuart Rogers said:

*"Sadly, 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. Very reluctantly, therefore, we have decided to end the current run of the play purely on safety grounds."*<sup>40</sup>

On the same day, after an announcement by friends of the writer, it emerged that Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti had been threatened with abduction and murder, so had gone into hiding.

In response to the cancellation, Sewa Singh Mandla apologised for the violence caused during the protests, blaming it on "a small faction which got out of hand."<sup>41</sup> Sukhjinder Singh from the advisory body, the Sikh Secretariat, said,

*"Nobody is saying this is a fantastic victory for the Sikh community. A legitimate protest was marred by violence."*<sup>42</sup>

However, other involved groups, like the Sikh Federation, downplayed the

---

<sup>39</sup> Bassey, A. 'The Birmingham Rep Riot: Behind the Scenes', BBC Radio 4, August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005

<sup>40</sup> *The Times* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

<sup>41</sup> *The Times* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

level of violence or, indeed, that violence occurred at all. As Steel outlines, those involved with the production felt defeated:

*"It was total bullying. The bully boys were out to frighten us basically. And they did."*<sup>43</sup>

The Rep also stated that, "Sadly... the violent protestors have won."<sup>44</sup>

The decision to cancel the play and the persecution of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti led to an outcry in the local, national and international media. For a brief moment, it appeared that another theatre would re-stage the play. Neal Foster, the Artistic Director of Birmingham Stage Company, offered to host the production, if the writer wanted it. After having appeared on a variety of platforms arguing for the play to be heard and receiving death threats himself, Foster received a phone call from the Artistic Director of Birmingham Rep, Jonathan Church. Church claimed he was calling with "a personal plea" on behalf of Bhatti with a request for Foster to drop his proposal, as she had received "increased threats to her life." After Foster announced this to the press, he had a chance discussion with Bhatti's agent where it was revealed that no discussion between Bhatti and Church had taken place. Later, Church apologised to Foster, explaining that there had been some misunderstanding.<sup>45</sup>

As another footnote to Foster's story, Diane Borger recounts how the Metropolitan Police arrived at the Royal Court on the basis of a rumour in *The Standard* newspaper that the theatre was thinking of hosting the production. On arrival, the police emphasised to the theatre that they needed to fully understand the public order implications, if they were to decide to go ahead.<sup>46</sup>

In 2006, thankfully, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti was able to return to her normal life.

\*

According to the UK census of 2001, there are upwards of 336,000 Sikhs living in Britain. Predominately living within London, the Midlands and the North of England, Sikhs are the third most numerous 'Asian' or 'British Asian' ethnic-religious group in the country after Muslims and Hindus. Originating from the Punjab in Western India, 30% of the Sikh population is based in the West Midlands, including Birmingham. The first wave of Sikh migration into the UK was during the 1950's. However, a second wave of migration occurred at a later stage from East Africa. According to one report, they are:

*"Less likely to be economically active, more likely to be unemployed, less well represented in top status jobs (particularly*

---

<sup>43</sup> Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>44</sup> Press statement by Birmingham Repertory Theatre, December 2004

<sup>45</sup> Foster, N. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>46</sup> Borger, D. *Interview transcript* June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007

*professional), more dependent on self-employment to achieve high status employment, and less well paid.”<sup>47</sup>*

Yet Shamit Saggar of Sussex University recently argued that Sikhs are “a group that have been moving ahead, politically, socially and economically.”<sup>48</sup>

Roger Ballard, writing about unity and disunity in the British Sikh population, observes:

*“More graphically than any other comparable group, the Sikhs, with their distinctive combination of beard and turban, are a classic example of a group whose members have used physical and cultural symbols to construct an ethnic identity around themselves... Sikhs themselves invariably represent their community as homogenous and particularly close-knit...”<sup>49</sup>*

Despite this perception, fault-lines over the idea of Sikh “leadership” and the “community” it represented transpired very quickly in this dispute. Apparent tactical differences emerged between the male elders approached by The Rep, who were seemingly involved in playing to different constituencies and for different reasons. Janet Steel has referred to the affair as “a political stunt.”<sup>50</sup> Whereas others have argued that the two councillors involved saw it as an opportunity to shore up their own local political support. Gurharpal Singh, Professor of Inter-Religious Studies at Birmingham University, agreed that Sikh community leaders whipped up feelings over the play in order to boost their power base:

*“The anger is probably orchestrated. Sikh community leaders only get prominence through mobilisation of people.”<sup>51</sup>*

Indeed, some groups, such as The Sikh Federation, later complained about the role played by the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham and its capacity to manage such a protest.<sup>52</sup> As Ralph Grillo has pointed out:

*“That Sikhs, in Birmingham, or elsewhere constitute a collectivity with a single voice is a powerful idea projected by those aspiring to and claiming their leadership, and accepted by many Sikhs and non-Sikhs.”<sup>53</sup>*

---

<sup>47</sup> Brown, M.S. ‘Religion and Economic Activity in the South Asian Population’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 2000.

<sup>48</sup> *The Guardian* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

<sup>49</sup> Ballard, R. ‘Differentiation and Disjunction among the Sikhs’, in *The South Asian Presence in Britain*, pp. 88–116. Hurst. London 1994

<sup>50</sup> Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble* (3) at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>51</sup> *The Guardian* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

<sup>52</sup> Basse, A. ‘The Birmingham Rep Riot: Behind the Scenes’, BBC Radio 4, August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005

<sup>53</sup> Grillo, R. *Licence to Offend? - The Behzti Affair in Ethnicities*. Sage Pubs. 2007

Indeed, the male leadership of the Sikh community was the main reason Janet Steel and others dissented from the idea that the riot represented majority Sikh opinion. Prof. Singh has supported this with his argument that:

*"Gurdwaras are managed by the first generation to settle in Britain and by new migrants, who are inclined to see things in narrow terms."*<sup>54</sup>

Later on, commentators such as David Edgar argued that the theatre was slowly becoming successful in drawing into its audience young Asian women in particular, reflecting a small, but "dissident community".<sup>55</sup> While Yasmin Alibhai Brown has highlighted the general tendency in which minority communities become defined by their male, religious representatives and criticised successive governments for pandering to the trend.<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, external perceptions of the nature of the community could be dangerously simplistic. In the aftermath of 9/11, racist attacks against British Asians increased across the board. Sikhs were not exceptional to this. One of the Birmingham councillors, Chaman Lal, was the victim of such an attack after a man ran up to him shouting, 'Are you Muslim? I want to kill all Muslims.'<sup>57</sup> Sikhs were, under these circumstances, keen to differentiate themselves from any association with terrorism. For example, in 2001, members of the Sikh community organised a march to Glasgow's George Square to express sympathy for those who died at the hands of terrorists and spelling out to the public that they had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks in the US.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Shivani Nagarajah recorded the wearing of 'Don't freak, I'm a Sikh' T-shirts after the London bombing in July 2005.<sup>59</sup> During this climate of insecurity and fear, identification in terms of religion was beginning to replace the catch-all use of "Asian" in a change that Sikhs were understandably anxious to further.

Another aspect of the affair was the way in which a generational and factional conflict grew up around the play that was, in fact, a way for the Sikh community to work out issues that were nothing to do with the play at all. Sewa Singh Mandla claimed that he was "pushed and jostled by people. They called me a sissy and told me to resign."<sup>60</sup> The factional dispute between the Council for Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham and the Sikh Federation belied a deeper antagonism based on a younger generation's dissatisfaction with an elderly, traditional leadership that believed in a less confrontational approach to the challenges of living in British society. Like others before them, elements of the Sikh community

---

<sup>54</sup> *The Guardian* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

<sup>55</sup> Edgar D. *Attack!* in *The Guardian* May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Alibhai-Brown, Y. *Religious Leaders were not Elected* in *The Independent* March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail* September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/sep2001/rac-s28.shtml>

<sup>59</sup> Nagarajah, S. *Mistaken Identity* in *The Guardian*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> *The Times* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

saw the *Behzti* affair as a moment of crisis at which it was necessary to "make a stand." Madhav Sharma noted that Sikhs commented to him that the protest was "a matter of pride" and that:

*"We won our right to wear our turbans instead of helmets because we are special. We can even carry kirpans (daggers), yeah? The police can't touch us right, because they are too scared of us."*<sup>61</sup>

On a BBC discussion forum another affirmed that:

*"If some fool thinks he/she can mock our religion, mock our faith, use our faith as a joke and to humiliate us, then they got another thing coming mate. Sikhs will never allow anything of the sort."*<sup>62</sup>

In the light of this threatening language and the accompanying violence, it was all too easy for the liberal establishment to gloss over the exact nature of what was offensive to Sikhs about the play. The most commonly cited complaint was the setting in the *gurdwara*, but few people understood the significance of this. As Jasdev Singh Rai explained:

*"For the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, the text in complete form is sacred. The Granth Sahib is the embodiment of the Sikh gurus and is treated as our living spiritual guide. The gurdwara is where the Guru is in residence and therefore has a different significance than a synagogue, church or mosque... most Sikhs feel they have to maintain the gurdwara's sanctity."*<sup>63</sup>

Others have drawn attention to the playing of sacred scriptures – kirtan – while the rape was taking place as being significantly hurtful. But equal prominence was given to more generalised accusation of gratuitous offence:

*"In a Sikh temple, sexual abuse does not take place. Kissing and dancing don't take place, rape doesn't take place, homosexual activity doesn't take place, murders do not take place."*<sup>64</sup>

Such comment lends itself more easily to those who would seek to deflect criticism of the play. However, another angry contributor to a discussion forum explained:

*"I can't speak for any other Sikhs, but a) I don't think that the portrayal of the Sikh female character kissing a black man is grounds for protest, and b) neither is the supposedly homosexual Sikh character, and c) the death threats etc made against the playwright were completely unacceptable."*<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Sharma, M. *A View From Inside in Free Expression Is No Offence*. Penguin Books. 2005

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/faith/2004/12/sikh\\_rep\\_protest.shtml/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/faith/2004/12/sikh_rep_protest.shtml/)

<sup>63</sup> Singh Rai, J. *Behind Behzti* in *The Guardian* January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>64</sup> *The Times* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.pickledpolitics.com/archives/258>

Ultimately, therefore, the main charge was about the use of the *gurdwara* as the setting:

*"We are not bothered about rape scenes or paedophiles – we know that there are good and bad people from every background and religion. The problem is having these things take place in a temple"*<sup>66</sup>

Ironically, by comparison, when Janet Steel talked about the moment protestors broke into the performance space, she referred to feeling "violated." Steel makes it clear that the performance area was her "sacred space" and that this was what made her "so angry."<sup>67</sup> While making a distinction between the violence of the protestors and herself, the admission does reflect the ambiguities involved. Steel points to this herself:

*"We felt very proud of this piece. We felt most proud because the majority of people involved in making this were a group of Asian women. And, as Asian theatre practitioners, it's been a really long struggle for us even to get our work put on; for people to recognise us as artists and not just as someone who works in the corner shop..."*<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, while simultaneously being angry at how the work was censored by sections of a community she feels a kinship with, Steel also sanctifies a physical space as if it were an extension of her very being.

Cultural concepts about the primacy of "honour" over "justice" also reflect cross-cutting differences:

*"Most Asian communities, including the Sikhs, are paralysed by behzti. Not the play but the concept of shame / dishonour. Behzti disables our ability to gain some sense of communal catharsis by sharing and dealing with problems and behzti drives our worse traits under the carpet and ostracizes the radical thinkers in our communities. It is also the unseen moral policeman. It's a complex and two-sided concept worthy of artistic interpretation and worthy of a deeper insight in the context of the unique pressures of urban, modern British life - a life far removed from village Punjab... Again, in a typically South Asian way we don't want others to raise these issues on our behalf. We don't want our dirty laundry washed in public."*<sup>69</sup>

In this country, "honour" is popularly understood within a context of "defending honour" and violence to women through "honour killings." However, it also has associations to do with "gossip" and "slander." As

---

<sup>66</sup> [http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west\\_midlands/4109255.stm/](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/4109255.stm/)

<sup>67</sup> Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.pickledpolitics.com/archives/258>

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti writes in the preface to her published version of her play:

*"Truth is everything in Sikhism, the truth of action, the truth of an individual, God's truth."*<sup>70</sup>

To the Western ear, the word "dishonour" is not as provocative and does not suggest how it can strike right to the root of what it means to be a Sikh. To elements of the Sikh community, however, even the title felt provocative.

In a multi-cultural and democratic society, inter-cultural dialogue is often argued to be a pre-requisite for people to negotiate differences and to come to terms with each other on an equal footing. However, the co-existence of different cultures, ethnic backgrounds and faiths in what was a predominantly white, Judeo-Christian Europe can, as in this case, pose challenges. Theatre is often considered a public forum where artistic expression is privileged, but in an environment that aims to be equal and inclusive. With stakeholder pressure and changing audiences, theatre increasingly needs, and is required, to be responsive to the sensitivities in its demographic.

In 1997, Birmingham Rep was awarded £5.7 million for a three-year programme of work by The Arts Council of England as part of its stabilisation funding. The programme was to support increased artistic activity, investment in information technology, personnel re-structuring, and investment in priority areas such as education and audience development. The audience development programme included a project called Right Up Your Street, which reflected the main commercial and social imperative to engage with Birmingham's diverse population, which is nearly one third South Asian. As David Edgar has pointed out, "The (Arts) Council now promotes the idea that arts organisations should both attract and look like the wider communities they serve."<sup>71</sup>

In the case of Right Up Your Street, the project recruited "an Arts Ambassador" from a target community and was given the job of facilitating a relationship between the community and the venue:

*"Once a representative panel has been established, the Ambassador organises a tour of the venue, a visit to an event and an opportunity to meet staff before setting in motion a series of discussions getting views, suggestions and feedback from panel members. The project has resulted in better understanding between arts organisations and target communities as well as more effective marketing and programming strategies."*<sup>72</sup>

As part of process-based work on a new play, Stuart Rogers emphasised the opportunity for feedback to be taken from non-theatre staff during

---

<sup>70</sup> Bhatti, G. K. *Preface to Behzti* Oberon Modern Plays 2005

<sup>71</sup> [http://www.cre.gov.uk/anthology\\_11.html](http://www.cre.gov.uk/anthology_11.html)

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.swam.org.uk/nl39.htm>

rehearsals. However, in terms of the dialogue with the Sikh representatives, there were very different parameters created. As Stuart Rogers emphasises:

*"Our approach to the community about consultation was not about shall we do the play, or shan't we do the play, because it was clear from day one that we were doing it. It wasn't about how would you like us to change the play because we made it clear also we would never change the play."*<sup>73</sup>

In essentially embargoing any consultation over the play itself, it is hard to see what outcome – other than damage control – the theatre's dialogue was intended to achieve. Politics implies negotiation and Gurdial Singh Atwal felt that his position as a councillor with a substantial Sikh electorate meant that changes to the play were possible:

*"Actually, my opinion was being a councillor they would listen to us. But I was surprised they didn't listen. They had a meeting, but they didn't understand, and they don't want to know. They just had a meeting and say 'Oh, that's OK, we give you time, we discuss the matter with you, but we are sticking to our point, and we are going ahead with the drama."*<sup>74</sup>

Currently, Birmingham Rep receives £948,032 in funding from Birmingham City Council's Arts and Leisure Department. Stuart Rogers argues that The City Council was nothing less than supportive during the affair. Consequently, the theatre itself has continued to programme challenging and provocative work that could equally have been found offensive by other sections of society in Birmingham, but with no protest and the development of an increasingly diverse, multi-racial audience. Stuart Rogers has affirmed this:

*"We've certainly done work since then that is as controversial, if not more so. The difference is that we haven't gone out and told people about it. So it hasn't changed our policy in the slightest."*<sup>75</sup>

It has also strengthened his conviction in the idea of complete artistic freedom within the law. When pressed on what would have happened if the government had passed a law against "incitement to religious hatred," Rogers acknowledges that it would have been a law that the theatre would not have agreed with and "a censorship law." Additionally, both Jonathan Church and Stuart Rogers have said that they would never enter into dialogue with a community like that again:

*"In retrospect, it would have been better if we had never talked to anybody, because nobody would ever have found out about it..."*<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> *Dispatches 'Holy Offensive'*, Channel 4, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Basse, A. 'The Birmingham Rep Riot: Behind the Scenes', BBC Radio 4, August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005

<sup>75</sup> Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, even taking account of opportunistic local rivalries, the mysterious incident between Neal Foster and Jonathan Church would seem to indicate that pressures behind the scenes were intense. On the one hand, Gupreet Kaur Bhatti was in hiding on police advice and, on the other, one wonders whether certain council members had reached a point where they were so concerned by the breach in community relations within Birmingham that the cancellation of the play was an acceptable sacrifice in their eyes, especially as the situation had become in Stuart Rogers' eyes "a war of attrition."<sup>77</sup>

As this evidence demonstrates, the *Behzti* affair can be seen to be not simply about the clash of religious sensibilities with liberal values. While this was how it was overwhelmingly presented in the media and, indeed, by the theatre, there is an argument that it was not primarily about the conflict between free expression and religion at all. Beyond the headline polarity, the *Behzti* affair demonstrated the capacity to slip around and between a range of issues. Gender could be said to have played as significant a role as religion. Beyond the religious sensitivities of the protestors and the offence taken at the use of sacred symbols, the play challenged traditional patriarchal values through a portrait of transgressive femininity. For example, one councillor even objected to the image of a woman holding up a pair of comically over-sized knickers in the publicity photograph.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, liberals could be dismissive of the sacred within the context of the Sikh religion while simultaneously privileging the sanctity of their own values. In the media, the affair became an opportunity for liberals and conservatives alike to reconsider the impact of multiculturalism in general, as if it was reversible or under attack. However, if the affair demonstrates anything, it is the way in which a play can still become a locus for various discourses - secular and religious rights, culture, gender and race - to conflict and overlap with each other.

---

<sup>77</sup> Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

## Case Study: "My Name Is Rachel Corrie"

Rachel Corrie died on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Aged 23, she had been in the Middle East for fifty days as a member of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), an activist group recruiting Westerners to serve as "human shields" against Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza, including the policy of bulldozing Palestinian houses. The circumstances of Corrie's death are disputed. The ISM says that the driver of the bulldozer deliberately ran her over twice while she was trying to prevent the demolition of the home of Samir Nasrallah, a local pharmacist. The official Israeli Government Report and the Israeli Defence Forces state that she was killed by falling debris pushed over by a bulldozer whose driver did not see her. Almost immediately, Rachel Corrie's death became politicised. While linking Palestinian suffering to the American progressive movement, it was also a landmark event to the USA in the way in which a Palestinian death would never be.

Throughout her life, Corrie had kept a journal and expressed a desire to be "an artist and a writer."<sup>79</sup> In the aftermath of her death, her family decided to post many of her last e-mails to them on the website of ISM as a memorial. *The Guardian* newspaper sourced the e-mails and printed them as part of a feature about her life, which is where they were read by the actor, Alan Rickman. Rickman was so passionate and moved by the e-mails that he approached The Royal Court with an idea of making a documentary play about her life. The Royal Court approached Katherine Viner of *The Guardian* to work with Rickman on developing a text. Corrie's family was approached for permission to use the material and the makers tried to consider how best the play could work. As Viner recalls:

*"We had been really thinking about how we could do this. We were thinking of doing a patchwork of voices, voices from Rachel's friends in Olympia, Washington, which is where she was from, her friends in Gaza, fellow activists, Israeli soldiers."*<sup>80</sup>

After some time to mourn their loss, the Corrie family typed up personal letters and sent 184 pages of Rachel's writings to The Royal Court in November 2004. Rickman and Viner were galvanised by this and felt that Corrie's writing was sufficiently strong to be presented without any ancillary material. It was agreed that any royalties would go to the Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice. Viner and Rickman were to be credited as co-editors with the focus on Corrie as the sole originator of the material. This was reflected in the title of the work, which was taken from a declaration in Corrie's journal – *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*.

Before the play opened, however, Rickman mentioned to a diarist reporter on *The Independent* newspaper that he was working on the piece. The report on this was headlined: '*Rickman stages show of anger at Israel's strong-arm tactics.*' It also stated that he was "about to become the latest Hollywood star to light the blue touchpaper on the powderkeg that

---

<sup>79</sup> Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/03/22/1435259#transcript>

is Arab-Israeli politics" and that he was "thought to be sympathetic towards the Palestinian cause."<sup>81</sup> According to Diane Borger, General Manager of The Royal Court, this article alone elicited "shocking" hate-mail from across the world.<sup>82</sup> Apparently stemming from New York, one individual contacted people who were listed as supporters in the company's publicity and who were suspected of being Jewish, pressurising them into withdrawing their money, at a stage when none of the donors were aware of the production's existence. As a consequence, the theatre later made preparations for protests and looked at how they would deal with any attempts to disrupt performances.

Eventually, the actress Megan Dodds was cast as Rachel and the play was scheduled for The Court's smaller space in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs during April 2005. The play opened to generally favourable reviews and without disruption by protestors. Paul Taylor wrote in *The Independent*:

*"Rickman's direction of the piece hits the right note again and again. A tribute to Rachel Corrie and to the spirit that remains alive in her writing, the production leaps into being thanks also to the acting of Megan Dodds. The directness, the humour, the poetry, the capacious-yet-never-morbid conscience: all of these are beautifully captured"*<sup>83</sup>

More predictably, Michael Billington concurred in *The Guardian*:

*"Theatre has no obligation to give a complete picture. Its only duty is to be honest. And what you get here is a stunning account of one woman's passionate response to a particular situation."*<sup>84</sup>

Others were more critical, including Aleks Sierz of *The Stage*:

*"Although she is obviously very thorough about her work, recording the facts about the oppression that she witnesses, she sees the Palestinians only as victims and says not a word about suicide bombings. Superbly directed by Alan Rickman... sadly, there's nothing here that challenges the liberal consensus in British political theatre."*<sup>85</sup>

Clive Davis of *The Times* was the most dismissive, calling it "a one-sided tribute":

*"With no attempt made to set the violence in context, we are left with the impression of unarmed civilians being crushed by faceless militarists. Early on, Corrie makes a point of informing us that more Israelis have been killed in road accidents than in all the country's wars put together. As she jots down thoughts in her notebook and*

---

<sup>81</sup> Pandora in *The Independent* December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004

<sup>82</sup> Borger, D. Interview transcript June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, P. *The Independent* April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005.

<sup>84</sup> Billington, M. *The Guardian* April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Sierz, A. *The Stage* April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

*fires off e-mails to her parents, she declares that "the vast majority of Palestinians right now, as far as I can tell, are engaging in Gandhian non-violent resistance". Even the late Yassir Arafat might have blushed at that one."*<sup>86</sup>

The play sold out for the duration of its three week run and was subsequently revived in October in the larger Jerwood Main House. It became the fastest selling show in the Royal Court's history and completely sold out again. Charles Spencer of *The Telegraph* also reviewed the play favourably, but, covering the play later at its revival, referred to receiving "a poignant letter from a reader...appending a list of other young women called Rachel, all of them innocent Israeli victims of the Palestinian bombers."<sup>87</sup> Originating from an article by the Jerusalem-based correspondent Tom Gross in *The Spectator*, the information was being recycled as a form of rebuttal.

Growing from the aspiration of Rickman and Corrie's parents that the play needed to be seen in New York, various parties from around the world expressed an interest in receiving the play. As Diane Borger recalls, New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) were "the quickest off the mark," although between six and eight theatres were considered in both the commercial and non-profit sectors.<sup>88</sup> Later on, James Nicola, Artistic Director of New York Theatre Workshop, reflected on his initial enthusiasm for the play:

*"... my original reading of the play... was inspiring and moving, and I really connected to what Katharine Viner and Alan Rickman were trying to do in their portrait... All of us Americans, myself included, live in some sort of fog of avoidance and denial, and here was a beautiful example of someone who pierced through that and did something and made a commitment... I thought she would be a wonderful example... to all of us."*<sup>89</sup>

In November 2005, Rickman visited New York to gauge which would be the most suitable venue and, after consultation, it was agreed that the production would play between March and May 2006 at The New York Theatre Workshop.

However, during these intervening months, Nicola found himself shocked by the raging argument, primarily based on the internet, about the real-life Rachel Corrie and the incidents surrounding her death:

*"In researching My Name Is Rachel Corrie we found many distorted accounts of the actual circumstances of Rachel's death that had*

---

<sup>86</sup> Davis, C. *The Times* April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>87</sup> Spencer, C. *The Telegraph* April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Borger, D. *Interview transcript* June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/03/22/1435259>

*resulted in a highly charged, vituperative and passionate controversy.”<sup>90</sup>*

For example, on one website, a visitor commented:

*“I can't wait to see the play. I will root for the bulldozer.”<sup>91</sup>*

While not as overtly offensive, the journalist Melanie Phillips’ vehemence about the play and its apparent politics is not untypical:

*“The British theatre is doing its valiant bit to promote the propaganda of lies and hatred towards the Jewish state... to eulogise Rachel Corrie is the theatre of moral dementia.”<sup>92</sup>*

During January, The Royal Court began to have some apprehension about NYTW’s preparations for the project. Borger notes that contracts had still not been exchanged and there had been some problems over the set design, although flights had been booked and a production schedule, budgets and a press release had all been agreed on. It was also becoming apparent that NYTW were concerned about the charged political backdrop. In Israel, Ariel Sharon had suffered a stroke and lapsed into a coma before the forthcoming elections and, on January 25<sup>th</sup>, Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections. Nicola later claimed these events were significant.

*“Listening in our communities in New York, what we heard was that after Ariel Sharon’s illness and the election of Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections, we had a very edgy situation.”<sup>93</sup>*

Meanwhile, in response to enthusiastic queries from Rickman’s fans, the theatre was still insisting throughout January and February that nothing was “definite.”<sup>94</sup> Ticket sales were, however, listed for sale in late February through the website Telecharge with dates, ticket information and details of post-performance discussions.

Prior to that, on February 10<sup>th</sup>, Diane Borger and Elyse Dodgson, Associate Director International at The Royal Court, visited the theatre to finalise arrangements for the residency. The possibility of protest was discussed and Borger acknowledges that Nicola’s “alarm bells were ringing,” but did not sense there were any substantive issues. Dodgson, on the other hand, “didn’t feel comfortable about what they were saying” and was also involved in discussions with Nicola about his inclination to “contextualise” the play through post-show discussions:

---

<sup>90</sup> Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/03/nyt-reviews-corrie.html>

<sup>92</sup> <http://www.melaniephillips.com/diary/?p=778>

<sup>93</sup> Viner, K. *A Message Crushed Again* in *LA Times* March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006

<sup>94</sup> <http://britbitsandclips.com/GBArchives/ARDH-GBFebruary2006.html>

*"We've had some brilliant discussions, we told them, but the play speaks for itself. It is expensive and unnecessary to have that after every performance."*<sup>95</sup>

Dodgson was also upset when a member of staff at NYTW referred, uncomfortably, to "mollifying" the Jewish community:

*"It was a very awkward conversation."*<sup>96</sup>

It is known that the theatre had also hired a PR consultancy firm – Ruder Finn – to advise it and was talking about commissioning a companion piece formed from testimonies that would include Israeli victims of Palestinian terrorism. Dodgson claims that in discussions with NYTW the views of the Anti-Defamation League and the Mayor of New York's office were also sources of concern.

On February 17<sup>th</sup>, Nicola rang Borger at home to inform her that NYTW wished to postpone the production "indefinitely". Borger prefers not to go on the record about the exact detail of the conversation. However, speculation in the media focussed on alleged pressure from "the Jewish community." Nicola has publicly denied that he was experiencing pressure from board members who were Jewish, although he does acknowledge that he had spoken "to many Jewish friends who have had degrees of discomfort with the topic."<sup>97</sup> He was also quoted in a panel discussion organised by NYTW as holding "private conversations" with Jewish board members:

*"... speaking to "individuals in the Jewish community" - and he now stresses "private individuals," "Conversations between board members and friends, between staff and friends." ...It's clear Nicola still has no intention of revealing any names, under the protection of "private conversations." Also: "No outside group pressured us. They gave us opinions, but no pressure." Maybe I didn't get that quote right, but there does still seem to be some muddiness over the distinction between "individuals" and "organizations.""*<sup>98</sup>

On *Democracy Now*, Nicola acknowledges a conversation from that time with "a Jewish friend," who had believed that Corrie was a member of Hamas. In another post-show discussion reported on the Playgoer blog, one attendee reports:

*"As far as "the Jews," I don't think Nicola mentioned all of two people - a friend and a Rabbi. Now I have to admit, I find asking a Rabbi to be a curious act, because I have my doubts that the theater would consult a priest or an imam about the contents of a production, but who knows. But the Rabbi was no doubt selected as a "representative" of "the Jewish community," and to be fair, he or*

---

<sup>95</sup> Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Heilpern, J. *A Scandal For Our Time* in *NY Observer* March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>98</sup> <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/04/nytw-panel-1-notes.html>

*she may not have offered anything to contradict the "role" into which he was cast."*<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, when Alan Rickman expressed his disappointment with the "cancellation" of the production in an article in *The Guardian*, he called it "censorship, born out of fear." Rickman also speculated on the influences behind this decision:

*"I can only guess at the pressures of funding an independent theatre company in New York, but calling this production 'postponed' does not disguise the fact that it has been cancelled."*<sup>100</sup>

On his Playgoer blog, Garrett Eisler went further:

*"Keep in mind a mass rebellion of subscribers is not necessary to make a non-profit company shiver. It takes just one big donor, one prominent board member to object. One wonders if the very idea of a woman denouncing Israeli militarism and supporting Palestinian statehood from the stage of NYTW would be enough to rub some VIP the wrong way. Or, being that board is made up of nothing if not good businessmen, someone advised a little caution and 'risk management.'" <sup>101</sup>*

Simultaneously, Nicola defended the decision in an interview to *The New York Times*. However, it only had the effect of opening himself up to accusations of self-censorship and susceptible to political influence. In a reference to "polling" of "the Jewish community's" feelings about the play:

*"The uniform answer we got was that the fantasy that we could present the work of this writer simply as a work of art without appearing to take a position was just that, a fantasy."*<sup>102</sup>

On the subject of the audience and possible protests, Nicola said:

*"I don't think we were worried about the audience... I think we were more worried that those who had never encountered her writing, never encountered the piece, would be using this as an opportunity to position their arguments."*<sup>103</sup>

A media firestorm of claim and counter-claim followed thereafter. General uproar at the free-speech implications of the theatre's decision was newsworthy on both sides of the Atlantic, but was pursued with particular determination through the "blogosphere" – primarily Garrett Eisler's blog,

---

<sup>99</sup>

<https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=12657288&postID=114602496261375331&isPopup=true>

<sup>100</sup> *The Guardian* February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006

<sup>101</sup> <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/02/nytw.html>

<sup>102</sup> *The New York Times* February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

but also on George Hunka's Superfluities blog and others. Playwright, Jason Grote started a web-based petition and other emerging playwrights, such as Christopher Shinn, used the web to voice their concern. Among liberal luminaries, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill and Vanessa Redgrave protested publicly at the NYTW decision. Ultimately, in an attempt to defuse the row – while generally maintaining its position – NYTW organised a number of panel discussions to discuss the play and its implications.

Meanwhile, Rickman and The Royal Court pursued other avenues to bring the production to the US. In June, it was announced that, further to a successful West End run, James Hammerstein Productions – a commercial producer – had successfully negotiated to bring the production to The Minetta Lane Theatre in October 2006. The production played to mixed reviews, but sold sufficiently well to extend for an additional four week period into December. There were no disruptions or protests during the production, although each night activists handed out leaflets outside the theatre. The production closed in New York on December 17<sup>th</sup>.

However, in a postscript to the controversy, Canada Stage in Toronto and Mosaic Theatre in Florida both cancelled planned productions of the play after protests and threats from donors. In Toronto, the play was cancelled after board members expressed public disquiet:

*"While admitting he has neither read nor seen the script, CanStage board member Jack Rose said, "My view was it would provoke a negative reaction in the Jewish community." Philanthropist Bluma Appel, after whom CanStage's flagship theater is named, concurred. "I told them I would react very badly to a play that was offensive to Jews," she said."*<sup>104</sup>

Alternatively, in the last twelve months, there have been productions at The Seattle Repertory Theatre, The Contemporary Theatre Festival in West Virginia and at The New Repertory Theatre in Boston, but not without incident. In Seattle, the play was produced with two prominent advertisements featured in the programme – one from The Anti-Defamation League and the other from the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle – protesting at the views expressed in the play and focussing on the "Other Rachels" featured in Tom Gross' original article. In West Virginia, a board member resigned and withdrew a pledged donation of \$100,000. In Boston, the family of the Israeli politician Benjamin Netanyahu were involved in a protest, while withdrawing permission for a play based on the life of the former prime minister's older brother, Jonathan, to be performed as part of a double bill.

As recently as August 2007, a production in Ashland, Oregon was cancelled. The director of the production claimed that a number of people

---

<sup>104</sup> *Variety International* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.

had threatened "not only to picket his production of (the play) if it opened, but all other Oregon Stage Works productions."<sup>105</sup>

The Executive Director of Oregon Stage Works, Peter Alzado, replied:

*"It doesn't matter if people protest, or boycott, or show up with signs. It's not about free speech. But whether or not it's a fair representation. If we're going to present something that is politically provocative, we need to make sure it is factual."*

As part of this process, Alzado was quoted as having been in consultation with a Rabbi, who he considered "a leader in the community," and a founder of Advocates For Israel – a local group in Oregon that aimed to respond to "a complacent Jewish community that was uncommitted to Israel."

\*

At the heart of its mission, the New York Theatre Workshop "produces challenging and unpredictable new theatre." It also aims to "explore perspectives on our collective history and responses to the events and institutions that shape our lives."<sup>106</sup> Having presented the New York premieres of works by the likes of Tony Kushner and Caryl Churchill, the theatre has developed a reputation, along with The Public Theatre, as a leading venue for socially engaged and formally experimental work since 1979.

However, Nicola and his Associate Artistic Director, Linda S. Chapman, both testify to the extent to which this kind of work has been under threat in recent years, especially under George Bush's administration. In a recent meeting at the theatre, both were adamant that radical theatre was extinct in New York and lamented the loss of theatre's role as a public forum.<sup>107</sup> Chapman, in particular, characterised the society in which theatre was now operating in the US as a corporate-driven marketplace that was authoritarian and actively hostile to notions of individual liberty. Nicola also made the point that theatre that did not wish to operate as simple entertainment was deeply marginalised and its producers were made to be like "beggars." However, Nicola also argued his view that "artists need to come to terms with the notion of commitment to their own idea." In order to make this happen, he felt that "every theatre needs to make its own way."

In 2003, NYTW had revenue of approximately \$4.3 million a year. \$2.3 million of that income derived from individual and corporate donation, as well as support from foundations. Nevertheless, individual giving at \$661,329 was by far the most important source of revenue. By comparison, federal government provided only \$145,594. However, in January 2006, the theatre was granted a vacant building at 72 East 4th

---

<sup>105</sup> [http://www.dailytidings.com/2007/0804/stories/0804\\_corrie.php](http://www.dailytidings.com/2007/0804/stories/0804_corrie.php)

<sup>106</sup> NYTW *Tri-annual report 00-03*

<sup>107</sup> From notes on meeting at NYTW on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Street, as part of a mayoral initiative to create a cultural district called the Fourth Arts Block. As part of the deal, NYTW was one of a consortium of recipients of a \$3.05 million award from the Mayor's Office, the City Council and the Manhattan Borough President's Office to assist in the renovation of six buildings. An additional \$1.05 million is pledged for a later phase of the development.<sup>108</sup> Even without claims that the Mayor's Office was expressing its concern about the production of the Corrie play, the timing of the announcement speaks directly to the kind of political environment that a theatre like NYTW must operate in.

Given its funding model, NYTW is constantly in the position of needing to be highly attuned to its constituency of individual donors, corporate sponsors, governmental departments and audiences. As the Corrie affair effectively demonstrates, it does so to an almost unsustainable degree. In essence, the traditional imperative to engage with values, beliefs and communities that the not-for-profit sector hitherto enjoyed is now fraught with difficulty. In a world such as this, "stakeholder", "donor" "community" and "audience" are virtually interchangeable nouns for the same phenomenon – nervous dependency. NYTW's retention of a PR firm is the natural, but absurd, extension of this kind of rationale, where a theatre's neurotic monitoring of its status with the public shades easily into its equivalent in politics; hence, the added potency of the word "polling" in *The New York Times* article of February 28<sup>th</sup>.

Where this intersects with concerns about multiculturalism is instructive, as playwright, Christopher Shinn, explains:

*"The downside of multiculturalism, I think, is a sort of forced, artificial respect that prohibited a certain amount of spontaneous interaction... There's a sense that, "If I'm not from that community, I don't really have any authority to have opinions about it, feelings about it, thoughts about it... I always have to defer to that community... Certainly, a feeling I had – in the mid-Nineties – was of an identity politics that had its very positive side... but the negative side was absence of dialogue, absence of inter-subjective engagement. And... that way of thinking solidified, so what the trend seemed to be, at a certain point, was that a theatre would do a black play, an Asian play, a gay play, – a play that spoke to a particular community, and often very effectively – but there became a sense in which we were all separate, we didn't speak a common language and we couldn't really understand each other."*  
109

Shinn argues that this was a debilitating factor in the Corrie affair:

*"There was a sense that Jewish people who objected to the play were objectively right and their experiences could not be argued with - could not be challenged - because Jewish people have suffered traumas in the historical past and that this is a fraught and*

---

<sup>108</sup> <http://www.nyc.gov/> Press release January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>109</sup> Shinn, C. *Interview transcript* July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

*painful issue. It seemed to me that part of what happened was that identity politics affected how NYTW handled it. They couldn't see room for different ideas about this common political and social problem – Israel-Palestine – and so they decided that the best thing they could do was listen to those who didn't want this done.”<sup>110</sup>*

The overlap of financial and socio-political interests in this case is remarkable for the way in which their impact is internalised and then acted upon. Indeed, one of the unique aspects of the controversy was that so few of those who objected to the play's production were willing to be public about their concerns. As Walter A. Davis has written, seemingly, these pressures “no longer have to speak in order to be heard and obeyed.”<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, the nature of public constraint around this controversy also had an impact for those who were expected to be in opposition to the theatre's decision.

Playwright, Tony Kushner has a strong association with NYTW and many called for him to speak out, as the expectation was that he could speak authoritatively and persuasively in favour of the play proceeding. His initial reluctance to do so was informed by his involvement as the screenwriter on the Stephen Spielberg film *Munich*, which he had been forced into defending over a five month period following its release:

*“There is a very, very highly organized attack machinery that will come after you if you express any kind of dissent about Israel's policies, and it's a very unpleasant experience to be in the cross hairs. These aren't hayseeds from Kansas screaming about gays burning in hell; they're newspaper columnists who are taken seriously.”<sup>112</sup>*

From a Jewish background himself, Kushner argued that, in New York, political progressives and the Jewish community tend to overlap, which therefore means that “it's terrifying to people that they're going to be attacked as anti-Semites.”<sup>113</sup> At a panel debating the play, Kushner said that, with regard to Israel-Palestine, “every subject is addressable somewhere in the US except this one. It's the one taboo.”

The creation of this taboo and the perpetuation of what a number describe as “a climate of fear”<sup>114</sup> in the US is part of a more complex debate about the relationship between politicised religious interests and the state. In George Bush's successful Presidential campaigns, his strategist, Karl Rove, was given credit for his party's ability to mobilise fundamentalist Christians behind the Republican agenda. The extent to which Christianity holds sway over the political sphere is self-evident in US society where anything less than a commitment to mainstream Christian values is to

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Davis, W.A. in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>112</sup> Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

<sup>113</sup> <http://mrexcitement.blogspot.com/2006/11/my-name-is-rachel-corrie-talkback.html>

<sup>114</sup> Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

effectively debar oneself from office. Similarly, the strong pro-Israeli lobby in Washington's think tanks and Congress speaks to the power of those, in Walter A. Davis' words, who would make a "fatal" equation "of Judaism with unquestioning support of any and all actions taken by the State of Israel."<sup>115</sup> This issue cut across even relative minutiae in the controversy, such as whether the postponement/cancellation of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* should be described as "censorship" or not. While Nicola was understandably upset at Rickman's use of the word, others not associated with the theatre saw the action as its justifiable prerogative. One visitor to The Playgoer blog commented:

*"Somebody please explain to me how the abortion of Rachel Corrie from NYTW's scheduling is censorship. The play can still be performed at any of a thousand other theaters across America."*<sup>116</sup>

In *The New York Times*, Edward Rothstein felt the controversy was "really more about public financing" than freedom of speech.<sup>117</sup> But Vanessa Redgrave was quick to define it as censorship and also called it "black-listing of a dead girl and her diaries," summoning up a vision of McCarthyite witch-hunts as she did so.<sup>118</sup> Given that censorship has traditionally been seen as an aspect of the state's policing of expression, the equation of an influential "Jewish community" with the NYTW decision caused anxiety in some quarters.

The public discourse around Israel-Palestine was at the heart of Alisa Solomon's disquiet on this issue:

*"I want to be careful and not suggest that there's some kind of conspiracy. That disturbed me in some of the quotations from Jim (Nicola) – partially quoted in some of the reporting perhaps. These are really dangerous images – this idea of some Jews controlling things, invisibly, with their money. Those are dangerous, scary stereotypes. It's very hard, on the one hand, to talk about the existence of a very mobilised, right wing, Zionist faction...exercising its democratic rights to send e-mails and faxes, demonstrate, write flyers and do all of that. And then there's the worldwide Jewish conspiracy image. I worry that the spectre of the latter was being underlined... this all-seeing, all-powerful cabal that was 'running' things."*<sup>119</sup>

Some of Solomon's intention was to demonstrate that the debate was informed by a tendency that was, in her view, "apolitical and unhistorical." Solomon felt it was important to recognise that the situation with the Corrie play was not anomalous and had various precedents, not least, Jo Papp's cancellation of *"The Story of Kufur Shamma"* by El Hakawati, a theatre company from East Jerusalem in 1989. She was also frustrated

---

<sup>115</sup> Davis, W.A. in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>116</sup> <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/03/c-word.html>

<sup>117</sup> Rothstein, E. *The New York Times* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>118</sup> Redgrave, V. in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Solomon, A. *Interview transcript* July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

that “the clamours around such works not only make honest encounters with them difficult, but also distort the discourse more generally by promoting the specious idea that any representation of Palestinian experience, no matter through whose eyes, is an attack on Israel’s very existence.”<sup>120</sup>

Indeed, part of the lukewarm reaction to the play when it finally opened at The Minetta Lane Theatre was a consequence of the hype associated with the controversy. The reality was that audiences on all sides of the political divide anticipated a far more searing experience than the one that transpired before them. What was still missing from the equation was the authentic voice of Palestinian opposition to Israel, or at least some part of its diaspora. As Johann Hari argues in his review of the play for *The Independent*:

*“This should be the story of how a privileged white girl discovered the suffering of the Palestinians and died for them. But on this stage, Corrie barely interacts with any Palestinians. The only ones she mentions are a few children - a very revealing illustration of how the authors infantilise and silence the Palestinians, reducing them to a picturesque backdrop for a white girl's tragedy.”*<sup>121</sup>

When asked whether any good had come of this painfully controversial experience for NYTW, Nicola addressed this dichotomy directly.<sup>122</sup> In a panel discussion about the Corrie play, Anna Deavere Smith had volunteered a story to him about a performance of her acclaimed verbatim theatre piece inspired by the riots in Los Angeles in the wake of Rodney King’s beating at the hands of the LAPD. One South Korean man was angry with her for overlooking the Korean experience in the play, so she went to him and asked him to tell her what he knew. Likewise, Nicola felt that NYTW had overlooked the Palestinian experience in New York and, subsequently, met with many Palestinian-American artists and engaged with their work. One outcome of this process was a production of *The Black Eyed* – the debut of Palestinian-American playwright, Betty Shamieh, at NYTW. The play depicts four Arab women from across the ages, including one modern-day suicide bomber, who meet together in the afterlife. The play proceeded without protest or controversy until its closure in August 2007.

---

<sup>120</sup> Solomon, A. *The Big Chill* on *Forward.com* November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>121</sup> Hari, J. *The Independent* August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

<sup>122</sup> Meeting with the author on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

## Opera, Uproar and Law

In 2005, there were yet more incidents that contributed to tensions between politically-motivated religion and artistic expression.

In the United Kingdom, for a generation of Sixties radicals who thought they had seen the end of censorship, the issue seemed to be returning with a vengeance. Having witnessed the disappearance of theatre censorship in 1968 courtesy of one Labour government, a different Labour government was pursuing a bill banning "incitement to religious hatred" through parliament. Sympathetic to the plight of British Muslims alarmed by the impact of "the war on terror," control orders, Guantanamo and the Iraq war, The Labour government seemed to be attempting a form of redress in order to offset a political backlash.

Hot on the heels of *Behzti*, where the protests erupted a month after the legislation had its first reading, a furore broke out around plans by the BBC to broadcast *Jerry Springer – The Opera*. Having begun at a Scratch Night in BAC in Battersea, where artists are encouraged to try ideas out in informal settings, the burlesque opera was picked up by Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre. The piece developed into an outrageously satirical morality play based on the dubious television programme featuring American chat-show host, Jerry Springer. After critical and commercial success at the National, it transferred into the West End where it won four Olivier awards. *The Guardian's* Michael Billington described it "as funny as anything in *The Producers*" with songs that are "superbly sung."<sup>123</sup> Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* hailed it as "a musical with a touch of genius about it."<sup>124</sup> However, by the time the BBC had declared it was going to broadcast the production, it had caught the attention of Christian evangelicals; in particular, one organisation called Christian Voice. Although the broadcast proceeded and was watched by 1.7 million people on BBC 2, the broadcaster was inundated with over 67,000 complaints as part of a concerted campaign. On the night it was transmitted, Christian Voice organised a protest by 150 people outside BBC Television Centre in London and by 30 people in Cardiff. It also posted the home addresses of BBC executives on its website, attracting death threats requiring police protection.<sup>125</sup>

Preparations had already been in place for a UK-wide tour of the production to 39 cities, but Christian Voice wrote to every theatre, many of which are run by local councils, warning of prosecution – either under the blasphemy law or as part of new legislation against religious hatred. More than a third of the venues withdrew, leaving too few venues for the producers to recoup their costs. Writing off the losses and with royalties waived by the authors, the tour went ahead. As Polly Toynbee reported in *The Guardian*, however, the tour was still dogged by the campaign:

---

<sup>123</sup> Billington, M. *The Guardian* April 30, 2003

<sup>124</sup> Spencer, C. *The Telegraph* November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003

<sup>125</sup> *The Times* January 10, 2005

*"Stewart Lee says a thousand Christian protesters turn up on the first night in big cities. In Leicester some of the cast were turned out of their B&Bs. The Archbishop of Wales tried to get the show stopped at the Wales Millennium Centre. The Scottish cancer charity Maggie's Centres dared not accept the money from a gala performance when Christian Voice told it doing so would "upset Christians all over the world". Far from all publicity being good publicity, it put off the usual audience for musicals, who assumed this show must be all filth, shock and schlock."*<sup>126</sup>

In the event, the tour proceeded to its conclusion, but the producers lost heavily on their investment. They were also affected by a campaign by Christian Voice to boycott the DVD of the production. Both Sainsbury's and Woolworths withdrew the DVD from their shelves after receiving "substantial" complaints – in Sainsbury's case just over a dozen.<sup>127</sup>

Clearly, Christian voice had learned lessons from the tactics of other protesting groups across the world. For example, Stephen Green explicitly expressed his admiration for the *Behzti* protestors. On the Christian Voice website, he wrote:

*"God sent a challenge to Christians to look at the willingness of Sikhs to stand up for their religion."*<sup>128</sup>

However, this is part of a much wider picture, whereby the centrality of the state in limiting freedom of expression has been replaced by highly organised, politically motivated religious groups that use coercive tactics – sometimes at the edge of legality – to suppress imagery or representations they disagree with. As Stephen Green makes plain in an interview:

*"Would he draw the line at breaking the law? Green answers thoughtfully: 'Yes... unless the law contravenes the law of God.'"*<sup>129</sup>

What is so elusive about this form of suppression is that it uses the freedom provided by new technological means and the parameters of a democratic society to constrain those it disagrees with. In respect of the Rachel Corrie controversy, Alisa Solomon makes a comparison with:

*"...highly motivated, well-disciplined activists using tactics familiar to any of us who ever participated in ACT UP phone zaps, anti-war sit ins, or letter writing campaigns to complain, say, about racist TV shows. The internet may amplify such efforts and mendacious moves right out of Karl Rove's playbook may make for false charges that get echoed again and again without refutation."*<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> Toynebee, P. *The Guardian* June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>127</sup> *The Stage* December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>128</sup> <http://www.christianvoice.org.uk/springer.html>

<sup>129</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4303965.stm>

<sup>130</sup> Solomon, A. *Who's Afraid of Rachel Corrie?* in *Theater* Vol.37 No.2 Yale.

The irony here is that the loosening of centralised power that was greeted in some quarters with delight during the Sixties has been replaced by a free-flowing digital domain that is open to equally coercive components. In a classic late twentieth century development, these will often manifest as decentred networks that sometimes rally around orchestrated leadership, but more often than not have a momentum of their own. While this can be open to individuals of all political persuasion, the phenomenon is unique in that it can spur more people to action around or before an event than the actuality of the event itself. A large proportion of the 67,000 protestors e-mailed their complaints to the BBC about Jerry Springer with many emanating from America. 84 per cent of the complaints were before the programme was aired.<sup>131</sup>

During this and the *Behzti* affair, national politicians were noticeably reticent in their defence of artistic expression. Michael Ancram, Deputy Leader of the Conservative Party, criticised the BBC for not showing more caution. Fiona Mactaggart, the Home Office Minister charged with overseeing the incitement bill, was silent about the threats to Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's life, stating only that:

*"The freedom of speech of the protestors is as important as the free speech of the artist."*<sup>132</sup>

Given that the protestors were aiming to, at the very least, change the play and were not charged with any public order offences, it is hard to understand how the protestors' free speech should have been her concern. Similarly, Estelle Morris MP spoke after the Rep had cancelled the production to say that she thought the theatre had "done the right thing."

However, it is important to understand that there is a deeper issue at stake here – something beyond the nervousness of politicians looking at the voting trends in their constituency. Lord Kinnock of Islywn in a lecture called *Retelling The Island Story* for the Royal Society of The Arts articulates this:

*"Those fellow Europeans who think that our continent's liberties include a right to say anything about anybody or – more precisely – any minority without care for the impact or the consequences should think again – or, maybe, think for the first time. They should recognise that all rights carry responsibilities and the entitlements of freedom are entwined with the obligation of self restraint. Recognising that is not deference. Failing to recognise that is arrogance."*<sup>133</sup>

This argument emphasises that rights of free speech are not absolute. In this context, theatres financed by taxpayers ought to pay attention to the sensitivities of the communities they serve. At a meeting with Lord Kinnock a few weeks later, he argued the merit of the "etiquette"

---

<sup>131</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/pdf/apps\\_springer.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/pdf/apps_springer.pdf)

<sup>132</sup> *The Telegraph* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004.

<sup>133</sup> Kinnock, N. *Retelling The Island Story* RSA March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006

approach to free speech, maintaining that the giving of offence can often be a random and illegitimate exercise of power for no other reason than it can be done.<sup>134</sup> This point of view is brilliantly outlined by the academic, Richard Webster. In an essay called *Reconsidering The Rushdie Affair*, Webster makes the case that there is a long historical tradition of Puritanism in the West, which has had a complex and unheralded role in the creation of the censorship debate:

*"In our private, as in our public lives, far from being free from censorship, we are in almost permanent thrall to it. Unable to face up to this fact, however, we have developed an elaborate self-congratulatory myth of freedom. In the midst of repression we celebrate freedom; from the depths of our own puritanism we proclaim liberation."*<sup>135</sup>

Ingeniously, Webster identifies the struggle we have with the censor within as a process that leads us to demonise anyone who would impose censorship on us as inhuman. He goes on to outline with particular reference to American foreign policy how:

*"Again and again the ideology of freedom has been associated not with political philosophies of tolerance, mutuality and co-existence, but with imperialistic crusades launched against 'evil empires' with the purpose of subjugating or annexing those empires."*<sup>136</sup>

He also shows how blasphemy has been used as an instrument of the Christian church against Jews and Muslims, while fiercely resisting and punishing those who would blaspheme against Christ. Intriguingly, Webster argues this as a secularist and critic of Islamism also:

*"Sentimental or idealistic estimates of Islam as an essentially merciful and tolerant faith are, in this respect, far from helpful. For unless we wish to deceive ourselves we should face up to the fact that, at the very heart of Islamic theology lies a belief that the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world are destined to exist in a state of war or conflict – jihad – until such time as the non-Muslim world submits to the supremacy of Islam, the only 'true' religion."*<sup>137</sup>

Webster makes clear his view that attempts to crystallise the conflict around free-speech are causing anti-democratic and dangerous outcomes. Urging compromise, his answer is that absolute unfettered pursuit of the objectives on both sides is unattainable and undesirable.

It is true that sometimes the simplistic emphasis on liberty overlooks the fact that a just and harmonious society requires an essential level of justice and equality also. Without the presence of either, as Webster and

---

<sup>134</sup> Meeting with the author March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>135</sup> <http://www.richardwebster.net/therushdieaffairreconsidered.html>

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

others point out, it simply becomes a repressive and hypocritical tool. Webster is right also to argue that intolerance is often met with equally vehement intolerance allied to triumphalism, rather than the combination of toughness and moderation required. However, there is a sense in which we are now at a critical juncture, whereby notions of civility and respect as part of an egalitarian politics are inhibiting potential for debate and, in the artistic arena, slipping over into paranoid self-censorship.

In September 2006, Kirsten Harms, Director of Berlin's Deutsche Oper, announced the cancellation of further performances of Mozart's opera *Idomeneo* in a production by Hans Neuenfels. First mounted in 2003, the production's ending depicts the king, Idomeneo, turning his back on the gods and, in particular, the Greek sea-god Poseidon. In Neuenfels's production, a scene depicting the beheading of Poseidon, as well as the main monotheistic gods of the world – Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, was inserted in an exception to the usual form of presentation. Although no protests had been received, Harms received a call in the summer of 2006 from the German Interior Ministry with news of a warning from the Berlin Criminal Agency (LKA). Following an investigation, after an anonymous threatening phone call, the LKA had concluded the continued presentation of the opera would create "a dangerous scenario with major potential consequences for public security and order."<sup>138</sup> Although the police had no evidence of a specific threat, the emphasis was on the beheading of Mohammed, as even the physical representation of the Prophet is not allowed in Islam. Harms acceded to the advice and cancelled the production. Muslims in Germany had a mixed reaction to the news, however, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, told Hanover's daily *Neue Presse*:

*"We need to take care not to withdraw more and more for fear of attacks from violent radicals. Self-restriction is only acceptable if it is done in full awareness of our responsibility to conduct a genuine, totally violence-free dialogue between the cultures."*<sup>139</sup>

In the face of these comments and strong criticism in the German government and media, Harms eventually rescinded her decision and the production re-entered the repertoire in December 2006. Although security was intense and expectation heightened at the first performance, there were no protests and soon the opera returned to normal.

There are more than a few parallels between this and the Rachel Corrie controversy. As Christopher Shinn points out:

*"Partly what The Rachel Corrie situation showed is that even representations are seen as dangerous. People who objected to the play felt that just the representation of Rachel Corrie's feelings was somehow destructive, violent. It had a real effect that warranted it not going on... It couldn't inspire disagreement, it had to inspire condemnation. So to me that's very concrete thinking. That's*

---

<sup>138</sup> [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/oct2006/moz-o04\\_prn.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/oct2006/moz-o04_prn.shtml)

<sup>139</sup> <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/prj/ido/en1755262.htm>

*making an equivalence between a representational work and an action. Now art can effect change. That's why it's threatening. But it's not an action in the physical sense of the word. So I think a representation always has to be protected... A representation should not lead to a literal death at the hands of a human being. If it does, the problem is not with the representation, but with the human being."*<sup>140</sup>

"Protecting representation" is exactly the motivation for John Maynard Keynes' original comment about the need to protect artists from government. So it is deeply ironic that the German government, despite its strong post-war tradition of free speech, should be the defender of a two hundred year old opera against the opera house that produced it.

In this debate around self-restraint, the issue of respect proliferates. As Ibrahim Mogra of the Muslim Council of Great Britain has said, "We do not wish to impose our life on anybody. All we want is to live in respect with one another." But the notion of respect has become clouded with expectations and assumptions. For example, it is used as street-slang in the UK by both black and white people who demand it as a non-negotiable right, sometimes enforced through gun culture and violence. However, in that sense, it has become a parody of the demand for equality. On the more general point, Oliver Kamm has forcefully argued:

*"Respect is not an entitlement. It is, at most, a quality that is earned by the intellectual resilience of one's ideas in the public sphere... The notion that free speech, while important, needs to be held in balance with the avoidance of offence is question-begging, because it assumes that offence is something to be avoided. Free speech does indeed cause hurt – but there is nothing wrong in this. Knowledge advances through the destruction of bad ideas. It is inevitable that those who find their deepest convictions mocked will be offended, and it is possible (though not mandatory, and is incidentally not felt by me) to extend sympathy and compassion to them. But they are not entitled to protection, still less restitution, in the public sphere, even for crass and gross sentiments. A free society does not legislate in the realm of beliefs; by extension, it must not concern itself either with the state of its citizens' sensibilities. If it did, there would in principle be no limit to the powers of the state, even into the private realm of thought and feeling."*<sup>141</sup>

In the event, the "incitement to religious hatred" bill failed at the last hurdle.

---

<sup>140</sup> Shinn, C. *Interview transcript* July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>141</sup> <http://oliverkamm.typepad.com/blog/2007/05/index.html>

## Casting the Audience

"The Director's first task is to cast the audience," Jerzy Grotowski <sup>142</sup>

\*

Leo Bassi is a New York-born comedian, living in Spain. Recently, Bassi experienced protest and controversy over his show, *"The Revelation,"* which he describes as "a tribute to secular values" and "a defence of atheism." Paying tribute to the Enlightenment and its philosophers, such as Voltaire, the satirical performance demonstrated Bassi's atheistic opposition to all forms of religious belief through characterisations of a televangelist, a fundamentalist and the Pope, who ends up handing out condoms.

When the show opened at Madrid's Teatro Alfil, it met with demonstrations by conservative groups who denounced the performer's lack of respect for Christian beliefs. Two hundred protestors wrote to the Spanish Prime Minister demanding that the government apologise for the "offence to Catholic principles" and two groups filed suits against the comedian and the theatre. Attempts were made to burn down the front of house at the theatre for displaying publicity, so Bassi hired bodyguards to protect himself. At one point, a middle aged man was disturbed as he planted a homemade firebomb made from gasoline and gunpowder in the balcony of the theatre, which was soon full with two hundred people. When the performance played at a festival in Toledo, the Archbishop of Toledo denounced the comedian and said that the Church "demands respect" for its convictions and that without it "there is no peace." Following this, the local government withdrew €7000 in subsidy from the festival after its demand that the performance be cancelled was defied. <sup>143</sup>

While many features of this story follow a familiar and distressing pattern, one aspect is revealing. At the end of his show, Bassi directs his audience to a form on his website where they can renounce their faith in an act Bassi calls "reverse evangelism." This could be considered a canny and ironic way of absorbing criticism that he is a "secular evangelist" as absolute about his value system as any religious dogmatist. However, it also speaks to a form of crusading zeal – a kind of fierce, ecstatic commitment that also parallels religious fervour – that, consciously or unconsciously, is channelled through certain artistic endeavour.

One extraordinary story about Bassi demonstrates this almost reckless determination to push beyond boundaries without serious regard for the consequences:

*Leo was invited to perform at an arts festival in Philadelphia, USA. He performed his show in a slick new arts centre and afterwards wondered why, since Philadelphia had an overwhelmingly black population, there were hardly any black members of the audience.*

---

<sup>142</sup> Cited by Walter A. Davis in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>143</sup> <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/spai-m28.shtml>

*Wanting to make contact with that culture he stated his intention to the organisers of going down to the centre of the black neighbourhood to do a show on the sidewalk. The organisers strongly advised him not to, for fear of his own safety, but when pressed they offered to drive him there. However having offloaded him they refused to stay in the vicinity and said they would pick him up in an hour. The locals were surprised to see this fat, besuited, middle-aged white man in their midst, even more so when he began setting up a street show and began a frenzied break-dancing routine. Their suspicion and derision turned into wonder and amusement at this attempt to do black dance, thereby making fun of his whiteness, and he gathered an enormous crowd. Suddenly, from behind him, some men grabbed him and proceeded to beat him up. He didn't fight back but protected himself as they kicked him onto the ground, destroying his props, breaking his ribs and pulping his face. The audience were against these self-appointed guardians of the black ghetto but were too fearful to intervene, except for one woman who screamed at them that he was just trying to make them laugh; she cradled him on the ground and with the help of a few others possibly saved his life. At this point a police car, called to the big public disturbance, screamed up and the two officers waded into the crowd beating people indiscriminately, including the woman and her supporters. The police dragged the semi-conscious Bassi to their car and took him straight to the hospital, assuming him to be a rather stupid white tourist who had wandered into the neighbourhood by mistake. As they arrived at the hospital and were bringing out a stretcher-trolley, a gunfight broke out. An ambulance had been followed to the hospital with the aim of finishing someone off before they got inside the doors. One of the police officers was shot and Bassi was left lying helpless in the gutter by the car. During the shoot-out police shot one of the gunmen and he fell on top of Bassi and breathed his last into Bassi's face. In the confused aftermath, Bassi's blood-soaked body was being wheeled towards the mortuary when he was discovered to be alive - nobody knew who he was because the two original police officers were either dead or injured and, being in costume, he had no identification. Therefore, unable to be registered into the hospital, he was parked in a side-room and left for several hours. By this time the festival organisers had got back to the site of the performance and could see no sign of him; somebody explained what had happened but they were given the impression he had been killed on the street. After frantic enquiries to various hospitals the police informed them that he had been alive on arrival at hospital but had been killed in the shoot-out. All this was being relayed to Bassi's wife waiting anxiously in a hotel. Eventually an orderly discovered Bassi and, after having cleaned up the copious amounts of blood all over him, discovered that his injuries, although bad, were not life-threatening. Because he had no money or health insurance, and was able to walk, the two of them decided to slip him out of the hospital. The orderly paid for a taxi to take him back to his hotel early the following morning. At the hotel reception they refused him entry because of his ghastly*

*appearance until they found out who he was. The festival organisers were preparing their statement to the media about the death of one of their guest international artists, so were hugely relieved, as, of course, was Bassi's wife and Bassi himself.*<sup>144</sup>

There is no doubting Bassi's idealism, but his catastrophic behaviour also exemplifies an anarchic compulsion towards transgressive risk-taking. Within that, there is a profoundly revealing lesson about the discourse of enactment and reception, as well as the terms on which it must take place.

Street theatre performers revel in the spontaneity and immediacy of their medium. They revel in the sense of surprise and pleasing disorientation that can be created when, for example, a clown performs in a previously functional and utilitarian space. Indeed, disruptive and dislocating methodologies play a part in much contemporary artistic practice, albeit with a different set of expectations and intentions. However, the use of traditional spaces – galleries, theatres etc – and marketing practices go a long way to reinforcing the contract of understanding that is created between people over the production and reception of an artistic work. In Western society, familiarity with these conventions is learned, implicit and only lightly patrolled in this age of mobile phone announcements and health and safety. As with all conventions, however, they are socially and culturally defined while dependent on individuals to enact them.

In psychiatry, Gilbert Ryle introduced the term "category mistake," which has been used to describe an ontological or semantic error by which a property is ascribed to a thing that could not possibly have that property.<sup>145</sup> In the arts, category errors can be both metaphoric and material. In a metaphoric sense, all art pursues this principle by encouraging a temporary shift in perception whereby something that has a certain property is made to be seen in a way that suggests it possesses a different property. For example, a gap between two wooden poles can become a mountain pass for Grusha in a production of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Even within a specific work of art, part of the excitement of the experience can be the way in which a transgressive dynamic develops between the comfortably conventional and the authentically unfamiliar or other. The language of this phenomenon can seem archaic, but, particularly in the performing arts, it is defined by such primal words as "danger," "magic" and "power." Harking back to the sacred and ritualistic roots of performance, it is where a coded artistry, suddenly manifests itself, unconsciously, as something other – with seeming spontaneity and immediacy. Effects of concentration, energy, physicality and timing can all play their part in signifying this change, but, in this, the crucial factor is that the audience becomes cast in its role too.

---

<sup>144</sup> Mason, B. *Leo Bassi – A True Story* April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007 on [www.theatrebristol.net](http://www.theatrebristol.net)

<sup>145</sup> Ryle, G. *The Concept of Mind* Peregrine Books 1970

Particularly in performance, the response of the audience is solicited; the minimum required is that the audience looks on and witnesses. Very few performers are not interested in the response of the audience and, as the experience is collective, immediate and in the moment, it cannot be ignored. At its most banal, a comedy is hardly a comedy without someone laughing and the way an audience expresses its collectivity in relation to the performer is what makes performance so distinctive. Artists, by one means or another, aim to work on this collectivity until an effect is achieved. The alternative is to become irrelevant. As Walter Davis has argued:

*"When we cast the audience in ways that flatter their self-esteem and reinforce their beliefs we create a theatre in which nothing happens."*<sup>146</sup>

In general, the impulse must be towards the activation of the audience in some respect, both collectively and individually. To be drawn into somebody else's world can be both a disquieting and an empowering experience. It can open the mind to a series of possibilities one had never previously considered. It can develop empathy, compassion and understanding for different points of view and, in that sense, it is a profoundly democratic and social experience. But a performance is also a complex system of enactment, reception and interpretation, which can be materially affected by "category errors" of many kinds and on the part of the audience as well as the artist. Leo Bassi's story is an abject case in point.

Nevertheless, both artists and the public need to hold firm to the fact that artistic representation is capable of developing capacities that are fundamental to the operation of society. As Christopher Shinn has identified, the need to write "outside ideology" is at the core of what being an artist means<sup>147</sup> and the ability to listen to that represented is at the heart of what society is.

Art can only continue to be true to its impulses; but, the question is: can society ever allow it to be?

---

<sup>146</sup> Davis, W.A. in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>147</sup> Shinn, C. *Interview transcript* July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

## Bibliography

- Alibhai-Brown, Y. *Religious Leaders were not Elected* in *The Independent* March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005
- Anderson, M. <http://mrexcitement.blogspot.com/2006/11/my-name-is-rachel-corrie-talkback.html>
- Ballard, R. *Differentiation and Disjunction among the Sikhs in The South Asian Presence in Britain* Hurst. London 1994
- Bassey, A. *The Birmingham Rep Riot: Behind the Scenes* BBC Radio 4, August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005
- Black, L. *The Creative Industries and Cultural Politics in Britain from the 1960s to Cool Britannia* in *Cultural Industries: The British Experience in International Perspective*. 2006 (<http://edoc.hu-berlin.de>)
- Britbitsandclips.com: <http://britbitsandclips.com/GBArchives/ARDH-GBFebruary2006.html>
- BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/763998.stm>
- BBC News: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/faith/2004/12/sikh\\_rep\\_protest.shtml/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/faith/2004/12/sikh_rep_protest.shtml/)
- BBC News: [http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west\\_midlands/4109255.stm/](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/4109255.stm/)
- Bhatti, G. K. *Behzti* Oberon Modern Plays 2005
- Billington, M. *The Guardian* April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005
- Birmingham Evening Mail* September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001
- Birmingham Repertory Theatre December 2004
- Bogdanov, M. *Interview transcript* July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007
- Borger, D. *Interview transcript* June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007
- Brown, M.S. *Religion and Economic Activity in the South Asian Population* in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 2000
- Bunglawala, I. in *The Guardian* June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007
- Burgess, A. *The Independent* February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989
- Connolly, C. *Ideas and Places*. Weidenfeld, 1953.
- Davis, C. *The Times* April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005
- Davis, W.A. in *Counterpunch* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006
- Dailytidings.com:  
[http://www.dailytidings.com/2007/0804/stories/0804\\_corrie.php](http://www.dailytidings.com/2007/0804/stories/0804_corrie.php)
- Democracy Now!:  
<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/03/22/1435259#transcript>
- De Jongh, N. *Politics, Prudery and Perversions*. Methuen. 2001
- Dispatches* 'Holy Offensive', Channel 4, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2005
- Dreams and Deconstructions* ed. S. Craig. Amber Lane 1980
- Edgar D. *Attack!* in *The Guardian* May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005
- Edgar, D. [http://www.cre.gov.uk/anthology\\_11.html](http://www.cre.gov.uk/anthology_11.html)
- Eisler, G. <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/03/nyt-reviews-corrie.html>
- Eisler, G. <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/03/c-word.html>
- Eisler, G. <http://playgoer.blogspot.com/2006/04/nytw-panel-1-notes.html>
- Finer, M. *Finer Report on One Parent Families Vol. 1* 1974. HMSO
- Foster, N. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>
- Lets Go* 18, Labour Party 1966
- Grillo, R. *Licence to Offend? - The Behzti Affair* in *Ethnicities*. Sage Pubs. 2007
- Heilpern, J. *A Scandal For Our Time* in *NY Observer* March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Huntington, S. P. *The Clash of Civilizations?* Foreign Affairs Journal. New York. 1993

Jenkins, H. *Culture Gap: Experience of Government and the Arts*. Boyars, 1979

Lawson, M. *Passion Play* in *The Guardian* October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

Nagarajah, S. *Mistaken Identity* in *The Guardian*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005

Office of The Mayor, New York City: <http://www.nyc.gov/> Press release January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006

New York Theatre Workshop: *Tri-annual report 00-03*

Paglia, C. *Religion and the Arts in America* in *Arion – A Journal of Humanities and The Classics*. Summer 2007

*Pandora* in *The Independent* December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Phillips, M. <http://www.melaniephillips.com/diary/?p=778>

Plato *The Republic* Penguin Classics 1987

Pickled Politics <http://www.pickledpolitics.com/archives/258>

Rogers, S. *Interview transcript* August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Rothstein, E. *The New York Times* March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Sharma, M. *A View From Inside* in *Free Expression Is No Offence*. Penguin Books. 2005

Shinn, C. *Interview transcript* July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Sierz, A. *The Stage* April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

Sinfield, A. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*. Continuum 2004

Singh Rai, J. *Behind Behzti* in *The Guardian* January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005

Solomon, A. *The Big Chill* on *Forward.com* November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Spencer, C. *The Telegraph* April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (1)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

Steel, J. *Asking for Trouble (3)* at <http://www.theatrevoice.com>

Steel, J. *Index on Censorship* 2005

Stephens, J.R. *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* Cambridge 1980

SWAM <http://www.swam.org.uk/nl39.htm>

Taylor, P. *The Independent* April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005

*The Daily Star* February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989

*The Guardian* March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1982

*The Guardian* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

*The Guardian* February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006

*The New York Times* February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006

*The Times* December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004

*The Times* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

United States Congress: [http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361\\_r7.html](http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_r7.html)

*Variety International* December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006

Viner, K. *A Message Crushed Again* in *LA Times* March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006

Weiss, P. *Too Hot For New York* in *The Nation* April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

World Socialist Website <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/sep2001/rac-s28.shtml>