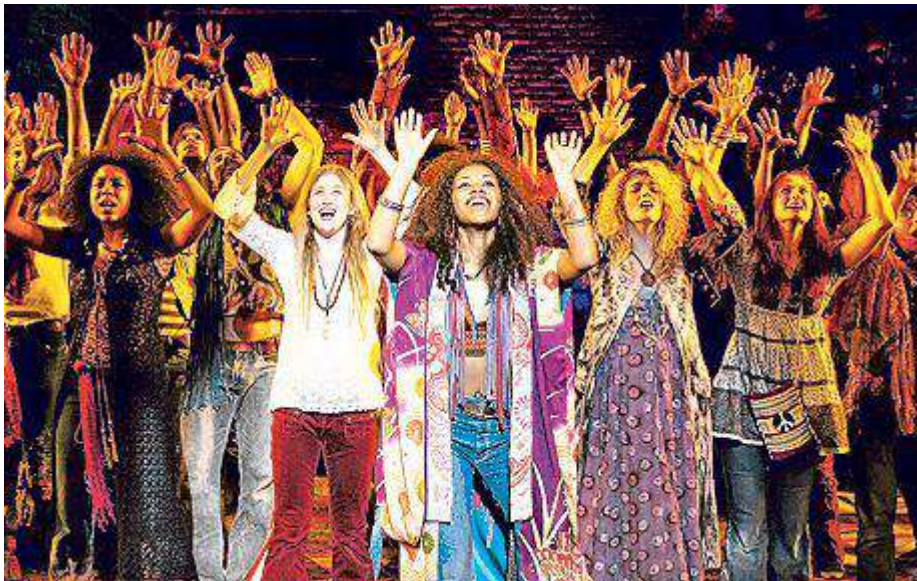


Censorship in the theatre

There has been no formal censorship of theatres in Britain since 1968 – but the issue is still alive.

By John Nathan

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Acting out: the recent Broadway revival of 'Hair'

On September 26 1968, Britain abandoned theatre censorship. After 231 years of making some of the barmiest decisions known to man, the Lord Chamberlain was stripped of his power to censor any play wishing to be licensed for public performance. The next day, the first Broadway production of the musical *Hair* opened in London. With its rock anthems and nude hippies, no show could have better illustrated that a new theatrical era had arrived.

The Lord Chamberlain's office had long been a channel for fathoms-deep reserves of reactionary philistinism. No other outlook could have banned the phrase "up periscopes" from being used on stage because, in the view of the Lord Chamberlain's comptrollers, more impressionable minds than theirs might be incited to "commit buggery". Among the shows that were stifled at birth were surely some stinkers. Yet the list of banned plays also included works by Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Pirandello and Strindberg, while Beckett had to fight hard for his *Godot*.

Since then, there has been an inexorable pushing back of the boundaries. In 1998, I followed two New York ladies of a certain age out of the auditorium after a performance of Mark Ravenhill's breakthrough play *Shopping and F---ing*. We were all pretty subdued after watching the explicit portrayal of the life of a teenage rent boy. It is a play uncompromisingly explicit in its depiction of anal, oral and violent sex. The censor, who decades earlier had objected to the term "up periscopes", would have spontaneously combusted. Yet the two New York ladies appeared almost unmoved by the shocking scenes. Eventually, one said to the other: "Well, there wasn't much shopping."

This month, Hair returns to London in the form of a new Broadway production. It arrives schlepping a hat full of awards and free of the moralising that stage nudity once provoked. Ben Brantley's New York Times notice praises Diane Paulus's production for finding hitherto unfound emotional depths. Nudity is barely mentioned. So, in 2010, does Hair arrive in a Britain where playwrights and directors are free to write and direct what they like? Not quite.

The day before Hair opens at the Gielgud Theatre, a 10-minute walk will take you to another premiere at the Soho Theatre. There, you will find the new play by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti – *Behud* (Beyond Belief). And the issue of censorship will be thick in the air.

Behud is Bhatti's response to her earlier play *Behzti* (Dishonour), which, in 2004, caused violent protests at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, known as the Rep. One of the offending scenes involved a rape in a Sikh temple. The protests were so violent that Bhatti had to go into hiding in fear of her life and the play was stopped.

"There had been forceful protests for a number of days," remembers Jonathan Church, who was the Rep's artistic director at the time. 'Bricks were thrown through the plate windows of our building. The police locked the actors in their dressing room for safety.' According to unconfirmed reports, protesters ran through the building with swords drawn.

Church clearly still finds the decision to stop the play's run painful to live with. "There was a kind of state decision not to fight for free speech and to allow a degree of mob rule," he says. "My view is that the police force chose –whether for cost reasons or, as was suggested by one of the police officers I spoke to, because of their relationship with ethnic minorities in the city – not to make any more arrests."

Most of the pressure to self-censor in modern theatre comes, playwright Richard Bean agrees, from Right-wing religion – although the protests against his own controversial 2009 play, *England People Very Nice*, were largely secular. Tackling

the sensitive subject of East End immigration, Bean had the audacity – some would say the bravery – to partially populate his comedy with racial stereotypes including agricultural Irish, oy vey-ing Hasidic Jews and militant Bangladeshi Muslims. No cuts were made as a result of the protests, Bean says. But there have been times when he has felt the pressure to change a play. The first was in 2006, during the Muslim protests against the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed. Bean's play, *Up on Roof*, was in rehearsal at the Hull Truck Theatre. Set in a prison where there is a riot, the play – whose characters include Jesus Christ – contained two or three references to Mohammed.

"It wasn't anything contentious," he says. "They [the theatre] were just utterly scared s---less. Bradford [with its large Muslim population] is only half an hour away. I love Hull Truck. I didn't want to upset them. It wasn't an important part of the play." And then, with a note of what sounds a little like shame, he adds: "So I changed it."

Still, it was important enough for him to call a meeting of fellow writers at the Royal Court. "I went all drama queen about it," jokes Bean, a big, straight-talking Yorkshireman. "I said, they're telling me to change my script or they won't put it on, which was true. I was trying to work out if I had the strength to make a fuss. And then [the playwright] Caryl Churchill stood up in the meeting. The only bit I remember is that she said: 'You should be writing about how Muslims are oppressed throughout the world' and she turned around and walked out. I've never spoken to her since, and I won't ever again. I don't think it's right for one writer to tell another what to write about. It was disgraceful."

The other time Bean was compelled to censor himself concerned an adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*, in which the women of Greece go on sex strike to stop their men going to war. A play that is constantly updated to various contemporary settings could, said Bean, only be set in one place at the time he was asked to adapt it – Muslim heaven. Here the virgins went on strike to stop suicide bombers. The director who commissioned it thought it was great. But artistic directors became nervous. Bean was told that one artistic director said the adaptation could not be defended politically. "So presumably," laughs Bean, "they are pro-terrorism."

In a remarkable echo of the private "theatre clubs" that were used to get around the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of public plays, one major theatre considered staging Bean's play in front of an invited-only audience. Then Bean was asked how he'd feel if a member of the box office was stabbed. "I said, how do you think I'd feel? F---ing awful." And that, he says, was the end of that.

But shouldn't an artistic director only be concerned with the quality of the play? "No," says Nicholas Hytner, the National Theatre's artistic director and the director of *England People Very Nice* during its run at the National. "I'd prefer not to have to choose between my responsibility to a good play and my responsibility to the people whose boss I am and over whom I have a duty of care."

Hytner says that, in such a situation, he would first consult everyone involved in the theatre, from the board to those responsible for security. "But I've not had that play yet." Then he pauses. "Although maybe I have. Maybe *England People* was that play. Maybe *Jerry Springer: The Opera* was that play." (The musical, which opened at the National in 2003, enraged Christians for its "blaspheming" of Jesus.)

Hytner has also been attacked for saying that he would only put on a play that was critical of the Muslim community if it were written by a Muslim – although his rule of thumb may have been vindicated by the controversies over *Behzti*. It would have been far harder to defend *Behzti* against Sikh protests if it had not been written by someone from their own community.

"I'd like to expand on that now," Hytner says. "There is a lot of writing that, for its theatrical impact, depends on authenticity. If a play has pretensions to authenticity it should be authentic. So all I'm saying is, don't lie."

In other words, a play that is written as if from within a community, must come from within that community. A lack of authenticity may have been at the heart of the row surrounding Martin McDonagh's latest offering on Broadway. *A Behanding in Spokane* is the British/Irish writer's first foray into Americana. Despite an acclaimed performance by Christopher Walken as an ageing killer, some New York critics were less than convinced by McDonagh's American motley crew. The *New Yorker's* Hilton Als, who is black, even detected a racist stereotype in the play's black character, Toby, played by Anthony Mackie. If McDonagh was black, American or both, would he have been accused of racism? Or perhaps the real question is, would he have written a play that made such an accusation possible?

It would, of course, be a mistake to conclude that today's writers and artistic directors are at the mercy of those who wish to curtail freedom of expression. There are bold examples – the Royal Court and the National Theatre among them — of artistic directors programming politically controversial work. But the simmering tensions surrounding issues of faith, identity and who is entitled to speak for whom, all take their toll – and their presence cannot be ignored in the theatrical landscape.

"*Behzti* hasn't affected me as an artistic director," Jonathan Church concludes. "There was a fascinating culture clash when one of the Sikh leaders came to talk to

our board. His view was that fiction is essentially a lie and therefore should not exist. It's a stand-off. I found the consultation process fruitless. And I suppose as an artist who felt personally crippled by the decision to take Behzti off, I feel I would not do the same again."

- A longer version of this article is available in the April issue of 'Prospect' magazine: prospectmagazine.co.uk
- Hair is at the Gielgud Theatre from April 14

Hair tickets available from the **Telegraph Box Office** or call 0845 017 5584

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