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Protests against 'racist/anti-racist' Exhibit B spread to France

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France's culture minister and the mayor of Paris have spoken out in defence of *Exhibit B*, the performance that was closed in London after protests accusing it of being racist. The work's author, Brett Bailey, tells RFI that it is "strongly anti-racist" and opponents have not seen the work.

A [petition](#) [1] launched by blogger [John Mullen](#) [2] and singer [Bams](#) [3] calling for the show to be cancelled has collected 19,500 signatures and its supporters were due to demonstrate against it outside a [theatre in Saint Denis](#) [4], a multiracial town on the outskirts of Paris, on Thursday evening.

Exhibit B consists of 12 tableaux, which recall the human zoos of the 19th century, showing performers in situations that depict the humiliation of Africans under colonialism.

Culture Minister Fleur Pellerin on Wednesday insisted that the work "means to unambiguously condemn the worst effects of racism" and opposed "these attempts at intimidation and censorship".

"I will under no circumstances accept that this performance is cancelled for unacceptable reasons," Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo declared in a statement.

Several anti-racist groups have also defended it.

Bailey believes the opposition stems from a "narrowing in society".

"There's a tendency of people to want to censor, it's really tragic," he told RFI.

"For me the most tragic thing is that the people that are calling for the work to be censored have not seen the work," he said. "It's actually a work that is very strongly anti-racist but the people are responding to media images - which are flattened two-dimensional images, it's not a photographic work, it's a performance work - are calling it racist and I think it's a huge misunderstanding and it's sad people aren't going to see the work before they react."

Exhibit B has been shown in cities including Vienna, Hanover, Brussels and South Africa and was also put on at the 2013 Avignon theatre festival, in the western French city of Poitiers and in Paris last year without any opposition.

Apart from some criticism in Berlin two years ago, the campaign against it started when it was shown at the Edinburgh festival and went on to London, where it was met with demonstrations and a petition signed by 23,000 people that led to its cancellation.

Social media are partly responsible for the way the campaign took off, Bailey believes.

“I think it’s also an indication of the tensions that are here in society,” he adds. “In Europe, in Great Britain, where there’s a lot of prejudice, a black person doesn’t have the same opportunities as a white person to have a platform to present their work. There’s a lot of frustration and I think a work like *Exhibit B* comes along and it scratches the surface and this thing explodes.”

On Tuesday the Paris premiere of Bailey’s version of Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Macbeth* received a warm critical reception.

It takes place in front of black-and-white photos of massacres in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has black musicians and singers depicting refugees from conflict-torn North Kivu [5] and portrays the witches from Shakespeare’s play as multinationals in search of the country’s mineral resources.



A tableau from Exhibit B
Auke-Schuettler

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Links:

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/contreexhibitB>

[2] <http://johnmullenagen.blogspot.fr/>

[3] <http://bams.fm/>

[4] <http://www.theatregerardphilipe.com/cdn/exhibit-b>

[5] <http://www.english.rfi.fr/africa/20131023-us-presses-end-drcs-m23-rebellion>

[6] <http://www.english.rfi.fr/visiting-france/20140714-Robyn-Orlin's-thoroughly-modern-spectacle-intrigues->

at-Avignon

[7] <http://www.english.rfi.fr/visiting-france/20140714-Satoshi-Miyagi's-stunning-Mahabharata-matches-perfect-setting-near-Avignon>

[8] <http://www.english.rfi.fr/culture/20140413-an-all-men-cast-performs-shakespeare-marseille>

[9] <http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20140119-edward-bond-people-existential-crisis-french-alain-francon>