

HARRIET REED

Censored! Curating Contemporary British Theatre

This paper could be presented as part of a roundtable or workshop on curating censored material/working with artists on the presentation of political/censored material

In July 2018, I co-curated an exhibition in the V&A Theatre and Performance Galleries: 'Censored! Stage, Screen, Society at 50'. The display commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Theatres Act, which abolished state censorship of the British stage. As well as tracing the broader 300-year history of stage censorship, the display also looked at the censorship of music, film and print in the UK.

The display presented several challenges in the interpretation of political material. While it was straightforward to source historic legal cases from the 18th to 20th centuries within our existing archival collections, it was far more challenging to examine instances of censorship in the present day. As curators, we researched extensively cases of what could be deemed artistic suppression in a post-state censorship society, including government intervention, funding/subsidy withdrawals, local authority and police intervention, self-censorship and public protest. We questioned how we, as individuals and as representatives of a large institution like the V&A, could present these new forms of censorship factually and engagingly. In one example, we researched the play *Homegrown*, written by Omar El-Khairi and directed by Nadia Latif. Commissioned by the National Youth Theatre in 2015, the play explored the radicalisation of young people in Britain by the Islamic State. It was canceled several days before its first performance and is yet to be performed, although the script has now been published. Because of the sensitivity of the material and the complexity of the events surrounding its cancellation, we consulted with Index on Censorship, a non-profit organization which defends freedom of expression. We met El-Khairi and Latif in person to discuss their experience and how we could include their work in the exhibition. The delicacy of including the play in the exhibition, along with other 'censored' plays such as 'Behzti' by Gurpreet Khaur Batti and 'Exhibit B' by Brett Bailey, raised questions about the fundamental mission of the museum itself. Would we be taking a political stance ourselves by including them in a 'censorship' exhibition, even though the causes of the productions' cancellations were inconclusive? Was the knowledge that Index on Censorship, theatre critics and cultural commentators had labeled them as examples of censorship, enough for us to publicly present artists, writers and directors as victims? These questions are still being addressed today in the acquisition, display and care of contemporary material culture. This paper will present how the curatorial team attempted to answer them in the context of this exhibition.

Link to the display: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/censored-stage-screen-society-at-50>



Bio: Assistant Curator of Theatre and Performance at the V&A Museum in London. She is a committee member of the Society for Theatre Research (UK) and SIBMAS (International Association of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Documentation Centres of the Performing Arts). She has contributed towards the V&A exhibition *You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966-1970* and co-curated *Censored! Stage, Screen, Society at 50* in the V&A Theatre and Performance Galleries. She was the Assistant Curator for the major exhibition *Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser*.