

## Exhibit B: A Look Back at the Anger

By Chris Benedict

A little under 4 years ago, London was rife with outrage and protest at the hands of Brett Bailey's controversial *Exhibit B* art show at the Barbican. Faced with fears of safety for both staff and performers at the hands of 200 protestors, the exhibition was cancelled before it even began.

But what exactly *happened*? Now that time has passed and tensions defused, what made this show, which garnered critical acclaim in Edinburgh and Paris, garner such fury as to warrant its cancellation?

The work, which displayed a harsh and real look at the colonial atrocities committed by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans, featured black actors caged and in chains, completely motionless as they were ogled by their onlookers. This recreation of the infamous 'Human Zoos' unsurprisingly stirred debate as to the ethics of such a display.

While Bailey is indeed a South African national, his white heritage was a pervasive talking point of the exhibit's detractors, denouncing the creator and his brain-child as racist and a grotesque attempt to shock for publicity's sake. Bailey however publicly denied this outlook and reaffirmed his intention to force a confrontation with an uncomfortable history of oppression, rather than to glorify these atrocities. In an article in the Guardian he stated:

"The Intention of *Exhibit B* was never

hatred, fear, or prejudice. It is about love, respect and Outrage."

There was also issue taken with the lack of agency of the black actors performing in the many Tableaux. In Kehinde Andrews' opinion piece he makes the claim that the Exhibit:

"Reproduces the idea that black people are passive agents to be used as conduits for white people to speak to each other".

This is, undoubtedly, a valid criticism. Many comments in articles on the piece speak of those black audience members who feel that Bailey's show did little but to revive and reinforce the sentiment that they could not speak out against the injustices being presented. This does not appear to be the objective of the exhibition, however, this reaction is a reasonable response to the graphic visuals on display and should have been considered by Bailey, rather than presenting these horrors without comment.

Many protestors of the piece complain at the objectification of the actors of *Exhibit B*, however this seems more a criticism born of presumption. The response of the performers is that their experience was nothing but overwhelmingly positive. Avril Nuuyoma, one of the many actors involved with the production, stated:

"[The] petition assumes we can't think for ourselves. None of us have been forced to do this, and all of us can leave at any time. No one brainwashed us into taking part, and the more we do, the more proud we become of our performances."

While fellow performer Anne Moraa said:

“I invited a friend, a black African and a scholar in African studies, to the show. I knew he could deconstruct this piece every which way and I wanted his opinion. Afterwards he said: “Everything I am trying to do in my work was presented in this exhibition.” I have never felt prouder.”

These testimonials contextualize much of the ambitions of *Exhibit B* more than a racist and vile display or the pretentious vanity project of a white creator. The exhibit meant something to all those involved in the project. Be it a self-empowering performance, a haunting reminder of past transgressions against the South African populace and their effects on society today.

In my view it's truly unfortunate that the London exhibition was cancelled back in September 2014. Designed to provoke, Bailey elicited the wrong response from the wrong side of the debate. Sara Myers, the figurehead of the movement to cancel the exhibition, had only the best intentions and her criticisms of Bailey's work are from a fear of the misunderstanding of the meaning beyond the cages. In her petition she says:

“If Brett Bailey is trying to make a point about slavery this is not the way to do it. The irony gets lost and it's not long before the people behind the cage begin to feel like animals trapped in a zoo.”

This fear is echoed by Bailey himself when he said:

“For all I know, I could look back at *Exhibit B* in 10 years and say, 'Oh my God, I am doing exactly what they are accusing me of.'”

So Myer's fears were not so unjustly held. However I believe that the show's potential for misinterpretation is a saddening reason for its protest and cancellation.

Over fears that the message of the exhibit would be lost, the cancellation of it resulted in a whole swath of potential visitors denied the right to read into the exhibition and see the brutally honest messages Brett Bailey, his team of actors and the Barbican worked to present. Messages that those who saw the show at the Edinburgh festival witnessed and which received such widespread praise across the board, from the Guardian to the Daily Mail.

The case of *Exhibit B* is an unfortunate one, but the show did continue to numerous other cities across the world until reaching its end in 2016 in Tallinn, so in the least it was not the end of the exhibit in its entirety. We can do little but mourn its London exhibition and hope to see more palatable attempts to convey the ideas Brett Bailey wanted to put across, ideally without sabotaging itself by disenfranchising those whose histories it wishes to highlight.