



Phoenix at centre of film festival protests



Flag waving: Hundreds of people block the High Road. Photo Lucy Moorman



Defaced: Red paint daubed across the Phoenix frontage. Photo Yael Grizen

By Lynn Winton

The Phoenix Cinema experienced one of the most turbulent days in its 112-year history on Thursday 23 May when its frontage was daubed in red paint in an overnight graffiti attack and it was later caught up in a heated protest and counter protest which drew in hundreds of people and blocked the High Road.

The dramatic series of events was triggered by the cinema accepting a private hire booking for a documentary made by an Israeli film company. Called *Supernova*, *The Music Festival Massacre*, the film features accounts from survivors and first responders after Hamas terrorists murdered 360 people and brutally assaulted many more at the event on the Israel-Gaza border on 7 October. The documentary was part of The Seret Israeli film festival.

The Met Police said: "While inquiries are ongoing, at this time the incident is being investigated as a potential hate crime."

Outraged at the wanton destruction, people rushed to volunteer to help clear the graffiti. By mid-morning, Finchley resident Amir Barkan had set up a Justgiving page to fund the clean-up which at the time of going to press had raised over £14,000 from 600 supporters. "This act of vandalism was

Police presence

By late afternoon, police were out in full force erecting barriers down the High Road. From here things did not go quite as anticipated by anybody. Anti-Israel protesters arrived in small numbers to find that there was no room for them outside the cinema, which was completely ring-fenced by an estimated 1,000 counter protesters, protecting the Phoenix from any more harm.

Phone footage posted on social media afterwards captured intimidatory exchanges and threats of violence between small groups of protestors but overall there was little trouble in the huge crowd. Although traffic was brought to a standstill as the police struggled to control people dancing to Israeli music in the middle of the road. At 8.30pm the crowd sang *God Save the King* and everyone gradually dispersed.

Phoenix response

The final word must go to the beleaguered Board of the Phoenix, who said: "We made this decision [to approve the private hire] with an awareness of our status as a charity committed to education through the arts. We seek a diversity of work and voices in our programming and we also welcome hosting a range of private hires which allow individuals and communities to choose their own

content.

"We know our supporters have passionate and strongly held views about events in Israel and Palestine. We appreciate that some do not agree with our decision. Despite this, we hope that people will remain committed to our shared vision of a vibrant, sustainable and independent cinema in East Finchley and for London."

If you would like to show support for the Phoenix Cinema, a membership is an easy way to do this, and includes free tickets. If you would like to support Amir's fundraising initiative go to justgiving.com and search for 'Amir Barkan'.



Crime forum

The East Finchley Safer Neighbourhood Team is hosting a public meeting on Friday 14 June with the topic of 'Bringing together police, the Borough of Barnet and the community'. Everyone is welcome to attend from 6.30pm to 8pm at Martin Primary School, Plane Tree Walk, N2.



Defiance: Police marshall the protesters. Photo Mike Coles

The Phoenix has a clear policy of not taking part in cultural boycotts, so resisted all calls to cancel the booking, despite two of its patrons, directors Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, making clear they supported a boycott of films from Israel. Artists for Palestine UK were just one of the many groups also calling for a boycott, stating "Seret is part of an artwashing strategy by Israel". Later in the day, the cinema's two patrons very publicly resigned, citing the screening as the reason.

Vandalism

In the early hours of 23 May, the day of the screening, masked vandals from a group called Culture Workers against Genocide filmed themselves defacing the whole cinema frontage with thick red paint, and posted it on social media.

truly outrageous," Amir told me. "Calling this 'artwashing' is either ignorance or pure hatred, and an attempt to hide the true horrors of what happened. I truly hope the Phoenix know how much their stand is appreciated, and that we stand by them."



No way through: Traffic at a standstill. Photo Mike Coles

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