

Sydney festival boycott: more than 20 acts withdraw over Israeli funding

Festival board issues new statement as protest against it grows, with program thrown into chaos two days before opening night



Betty Grumble, Tom Ballard and Yumi Stynes are among the Sydney festival acts who have recently withdrawn from the program.

Kelly Burke
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More than 20 acts have pulled out of the 2022 Sydney festival, just 48 hours before opening night, boycotting the festival over a sponsorship deal with the Israeli embassy.

The comedian Tom Ballard, the Belvoir theatre production of *Black Brass*, former NSW politician Meredith Burgmann, First Nations dance company Marrugeku and commentator Yumi Stynes are just some of the festival participants who have either cancelled or distanced themselves in protest, joining a growing number of Arab, pro-Palestinian, First Nations and Greens groups spearheading the call for a boycott.

A number of festival events including Marrugeku's *Jurrungu Ngan-ga* and an installation of the Wiradjuri visual artist Karla Dickens' work *Return to Sender* are still going ahead at Carriageworks, but in an independent capacity, having withdrawn from the Sydney festival banner.

The Belvoir St Theatre production of *Black Brass* is also still going ahead but has opted not to receive its previously agreed funding from the festival.

In a statement posted to social media on Tuesday, Belvoir said it had a “long and fruitful relationship” with the Sydney festival. “Black Brass was made by and with the many African communities in Perth,” the post said.

“At the heart of the process was a commitment to cultural safety which gives artists the freedom to work without fear or compromise.

“In recognition that the community is now divided and Palestinian artists are unable to participate in this year’s Sydney Festival with the same cultural safety that was so essential to the making of Black Brass, we are choosing not to accept any direct financial support from the Festival.”

On Tuesday the Sydney festival board put out a second statement, backing its controversial decision to forge ahead with a Sydney Dance Company production of Decadance, a work created by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin and Tel Aviv’s Batsheva Dance Company, whose Sydney festival participation is being funded by a \$20,000 grant from the Embassy of Israel in Canberra.

The board’s latest statement acknowledged the mounting calls for artists and audiences to boycott the festival, a movement which began in late December.

“The Sydney Festival Board wishes collectively to affirm its respect for the right of all groups to protest and raise concerns,” the statement said.

“We spent time with a number of groups who have concerns about this funding and welcomed the opportunity to engage with them. All funding agreements for the current Festival – including for Decadance - will be honoured, and the performances will proceed.

“At the same time, the Board has also determined it will review its practices in relation to funding from foreign governments or related parties.”

The statement went on to say it respected the right of any artist to withdraw from the festival.

“As a board we ask for respectful dialogue by all individuals and organisations when engaging with artists, especially for the personal decisions that artists make,” the statement concluded.

Guardian Australia has sought comment from the board’s chairperson, David Kirk.

Among the other artists and organisations withdrawing are the comedian Nazeem Hussain, visual artist Khaled Sabsabi, burlesque performer Betty Grumble, Malyangapa and Barkindji hip-hop artist Barkaa, as well as the Bankstown poetry slam, and musician Marcus Whale.

On Instagram, Melbourne band Karate Boogaloo – who have also pulled out – said the act of boycotts and divestments had a strong track record of holding governments and corporations accountable for their actions.

According to a statement released on 22 December by the Palestinian Justice Movement Sydney, the sponsorship deal was sealed in May, the same month Israeli armed forces launched a series of air attacks on Gaza, killing a number of Palestinian civilians.

“Palestine advocates call on all opponents of apartheid to boycott the 2022 Sydney Festival,” that statement said. “By partnering with Israel, Sydney festival will ... contribute to the normalisation of an apartheid state.”

In a statement issued to the Guardian on 23 December, and reiterated on 4 January, the Israel Embassy said: “The State of Israel is proud to support and participate in this important Festival that showcases leading artists and performances from around the world.

“Israel has always and will continue to promote cultural exchange and engage in cultural dialogue in numerous countries including Australia.

“Culture is a bridge to coexistence, cooperation and rapprochement and should be left out of the political arena.”