

The film that refuses to die

The makers of a documentary on deaths in police custody are defying threats to stop the film being shown. They believe nothing less than freedom of expression is at stake

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The makers of a controversial film narrated by British actress Cathy Tyson about deaths in police custody are planning a wave of nationwide "guerrilla screenings" to defy police threats of legal action to stop the film being shown.

An unprecedented campaign by police lawyers who have targeted venues that planned to show the film has already led to two cancellations in London. A third screening at Conway Hall, a London venue that prides itself on its tradition of upholding freedom of speech, only went ahead after managers left the building and the audience seized projection facilities.

Injustice, which took seven years to make, includes calls for several Metropolitan Police officers to be prosecuted. But the Police Federation, through its solicitors Russell, Jones and Walker, has sent a series of legal warnings to cinemas planning to screen the film, often just minutes before it is due to be shown.

The film makers Migrant Media have developed a last-minute strategy of shifting the venue to defy the police ban. The Cornerhouse, an independent cinema in Manchester, was forced to cancel a screening of the film on 26 July after threats from the police, but an alternative showing was set up at a squatted café round the corner. Similar tactics were used when police stopped a screening this month at The Lux, an independent cinema in Hoxton, east London. The screening was moved to a pub.

Tyson, who starred with Bob Hoskins in *Mona Lisa*, said she became involved because of her "deep respect" for the families of the victims. She told *The Observer*: "The fact that they (the police) are trying to get this film stopped is sinister. I am not anti-police, but why don't they come forward and freely admit what has gone on in these cases." Injustice director Ken Fero said: "One American civil rights activist said it reminded him of underground film screenings he's seen in the Soviet Union. It is amazing to think it has come to this in Britain. But it's the only way to get the film shown."

In the past three decades there have been 1,000 deaths in police custody, prisons and mental institutions, without a single conviction. The film concentrates on the cases of three men - Shiji Lapite, Brian Douglas and Ibrahima Sey - who all died in the mid-Nineties from injuries received while they were being arrested by Metropolitan Police officers in different parts of London. Shiji Lapite, a Nigerian asylum-seeker and father of two, was stopped by police in Hackney in December 1994 for "acting suspiciously". Officers said that they found crack cocaine at the scene. In a struggle one officer held Lapite in a headlock while a fellow officer kicked him in the head.

The coroner found more than 40 areas of injury on Lapite's body, including crushed bones at the front of his neck and severe bruising across his back. As he was being loaded into a police van, witnesses saw his head "lolling about".

According to Lapite's lawyer, Raju Bhatt, the officers at the inquest described the Nigerian as "the biggest, strongest, most violent black man they had ever seen". Despite this, the only injuries suffered by the police officers were a scratch on the tip of one man's finger and a bite mark on the shoulder of the officer using the head lock.

The jury in the inquest took 20 minutes to come to a unanimous verdict of unlawful killing. However, the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to proceed against the two officers involved, Paul Wright and Andrew McCallum.

Five months after the death of Shiji Lapite, Brian Douglas was stopped by police in Clapham, south London, after a night out with a friend. Two officers, Mark Tuffy and Paul Harrison, admit using batons to restrain Douglas before bundling him

into a police van and taking him to Kennington police station.

Despite serious head injuries, he was at the station for 15 hours before being taken to hospital. It later emerged he had a fractured skull and damage to his brain stem. He died almost a week later. At the inquest Tuffy said his baton had accidentally slipped when he hit Douglas on the shoulder. Evidence at the inquest said the force of the blow was equivalent to being dropped from 11 times his own height on to his head. The jury returned a verdict of misadventure, later challenged unsuccessfully by the family at the High Court.

The third case featured in Injustice involved Ibrahima Sey, a Muslim from the Gambia, who had just celebrated the birth of his daughter. In March 1996 police were called to a domestic dispute at Sey's home in Forest Gate, east London. Police later reported that there had been "a bit of a scuffle" during which CS gas had been used.

Relatives were told the next day that Ibrahima had "passed away" in the custody suite at Ilford police station. When they were shown his body they saw he was badly bruised on his forehead and stomach - the cause of death was officially recorded as "restraint asphyxia". The inquest jury was so appalled it insisted on adding manslaughter to the verdict of unlawful killing.

Correspondence seen by The Observer shows that the custody officer in the case, Stephen Highton, believes the film clearly accuses him and his colleagues of murder, a charge they deny. There are no interviews with police in the film, although a spokesman for Migrant Media said individual officers had been approached in each case for comment.

Injustice is intended as a tribute to the families of those who have died in custody who have together formed the United Friends and Families Campaign. The Police Federation claims it is only opposed to the film because it contains scenes where officers are openly and repeatedly accused by relatives and their supporters of being "murderers". In correspondence seen by The Observer, a lawyer for some of the officers told a cinema planning to show the film there was no legal basis for any of the accusations. He warned showing it could result in "very substantial" libel damages.

This is particularly problematic in the case of Douglas, where the inquest jury decided that there had been no wrongdoing. But lawyers acting for Migrant Media have advised them that the public interest in showing the film outweighs the concerns of the officers, whose version of events is clearly stated.

Eva Tarr Kirkhope, who runs the Metro Cinema in London's West End, the first venue targeted by the police campaign, added her voice to calls to allow the film a national release: "The families present at the screening were devastated. I am extremely angry about the situation and hope I will be able to show the film in the future."

The publicity surrounding the film has also raised hopes of a full public inquiry into deaths in police custody. Amnesty International and the civil rights group Liberty have raised the issue with the United Nations, which is due to report on Britain's record on human rights and racism later this year.

Brenda Weinberg, the sister of Douglas and chair of the United Friends and Families Campaign, said: "The police are clearly frightened of the families and the campaign, so they are threatening to sue the cinemas." The new Home Secretary, David Blunkett has expressed concern about the number of deaths in custody, and the United Friends and Families Campaign is preparing to raise money for private prosecutions. "This is more than just a documentary, this is a political campaign," Fero said. "This has taken seven years of my life, and I am not about to give up now."

The next screening of Injustice will take place in Liverpool this Saturday at the launch of the campaign for James Ashley, shot dead by police in 1998. For details see www.injusticefilm.co.uk