

Visa difficulties for foreign artists damaging S. Florida Search Term Begin film Search Term End Search Term Begin festivals Search Term End

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Sep. 8--A celebrated Iranian director agrees to attend a Fort Lauderdale Search Term Begin film Search Term End Search Term Begin festival Search Term End , but his seat is left empty. A West Palm Beach arts center invites schoolchildren to see a Scottish theater troupe, but has to cancel at the last minute.

From the Search Term Begin industry Search Term End where the show must go on, a new slogan: The showman must wait for a visa.

With federal authorities more vigilant about who enters the United States, foreign directors, musicians and other entertainers are sweating the visa application process as never before.

Backlogs grew after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which brought the uncomfortable news that the hijackers came to the United States legally, on temporary visas. That prompted federal authorities to scrutinize foreign visitors more closely, while Congress passed legislation that became law requiring immigration officials to interview all visa applicants in person.

The holdups have been especially taxing in the performing arts, where presenters must publicize plays and concerts, and sell tickets to them, while visa applications are pending. In worst-case scenarios, they're forced to cancel festivals and reshuffle plays.

The wait times have also translated into a drop in the number of presenters inviting foreign artists here. Event organizers say that deprives U.S. audiences of robust cultural choices, while performers miss out on the kinds of interactions that keep creative juices flowing.

"We want to be able to present a diverse program, and we like to have international artists here to offer that variety. It's something that's very tenuous and unpredictable," said Tracy Butler, director of education at the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach.

Butler is applying for visas for the London-based Tall Stories theater company, and decided to spend extra money to expedite the process after learning federal officials might not answer her request until after a scheduled Oct. 11 opening. The process is always a nail-biter, she said.

Last year, the center had to cancel an adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* when a Scottish troupe ran into visa problems. The event was largely geared toward students, who had been studying the story. The center offered them seats at other plays, and lost ticket revenue.

In another incident, Gregory von Hausch, executive director of the Fort Lauderdale International Search Term Begin Film Search Term End Search Term Begin Festival Search Term End , stood before an audience of avid movie patrons last fall and broke the news that Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi would not be on hand for the showing of his Search Term Begin film Search Term End Turtles Can Fly. U.S. officials had denied his visa.

"Whoever made this decision just said, 'No,'" said von Hausch, who has made similar apologies about other visa denials and Search Term Begin immigration Search Term End delays. "I don't know what was holding it up. We're never privy to that information."

Frustration reached a boiling point in April, when members of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters told a congressional hearing that the vagaries of visa processing were putting their industry in jeopardy. According to an association survey, only 60 percent of event organizers hosted foreign artists in 2005, down from 75 percent in 2002.

The group asked for reduced wait times, and shortcuts, so artists would not have to make special trips, sometimes to home countries where they no longer reside, to attend immigration interviews. They also asked the State Department to have more personnel process the overseas applications.

The delays and extra costs hurt visa applicants from diverse fields, from scientists to athletes to chefs. But Patrick Madden, the association's vice president of external affairs, said musicians and dancers, and their presenters, are up against inflexible deadlines. "When you've sold 2,000 tickets, and paid travel expenses -- for a symphony or chamber group, you're talking about instruments, costumes, all the logistics involved -- it's not simply a matter of saying this event will be a couple of days late," he said.

Arts organizations can expedite visa requests for foreign artists if they pay special fees. Under the provision, authorities will respond to visa requests within 15 working days for \$1,000 per person. But the fees can become prohibitive for small nonprofit organizations, and about 60 percent of U.S. presenters fit into this category.

Not everyone agrees performing arts should be a top priority of the U.S. Search Term Begin immigration Search Term End system.

"If the question is, 'Do we have a desperate need for more foreign entertainers?' I'm skeptical," said Steven Camarota, research director of the Washington-based Center for Search Term Begin Immigration Search Term End Studies, which supports tighter restrictions on Search Term Begin immigration Search Term End .

Ana Santiago, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Citizenship and Search Term Begin Immigration Search Term End Services, said her office could not immediately respond to complaints over processing times for visas, but her agency recently announced that presenters can send applications to a central office in California to shorten delays.

Bill Martinez, an immigration lawyer who co-founded Latino Entertainment Partners, said the visa application system is working well overall. Many performers can travel to the United States on simple tourist visas as long as they aren't getting paid, he said. But they must prove they have deep roots in their home countries and will return there.

Martinez also noted that a new mechanism, introduced just weeks ago, allows performers to go online and request their immigration interviews be pushed forward to meet flight schedules. The service is quick and free.

Landing performer visas in time is still difficult, but local presenters are determined to keep seeking them.

"I'm more likely to fight harder to keep international artists coming here," said Beth Boone, artistic and executive director at Miami Light Project. "I'm not going to participate in the cultural closing up of our borders."

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