

Leaking Bodies Uncovered At Popular "Body" Show

Saturday, 28 May 2005

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I-Team Investigates

ABC, chaqnnel 7, San Francisco, CA

May 25, 2005 (ABC7)--An exhibit of real human corpses is the most popular show ever at San Francisco's Masonic Center. But problems uncovered by the ABC7 I-Team threaten to shut down the exhibit.

The most obvious problem is the corpses are leaking. To understand how we got to the point of dead, dripping bodies for public view there on Nob Hill, it's important to see how this type of show began and how immensely profitable it can be.

A word of caution if watching the video, some of the pictures are graphic, but we will not show the worst of them.

Gunther von Hagens is the pioneer of "plastination," replacing the body fluids in a corpse with plastic. He first prepared such specimens almost 30 years ago as a teaching tool for medical students, but von Hagens soon realized he could reach a much wider audience.

Gunther von Hagens: "And the interest of the lay people to look beneath their skin is so, so high, you know."

The I-Team spoke with the doctor at his lab in Heidelberg, Germany last week where he unveiled his new project -- a plastinated elephant. Von Hagens uses an artistic touch to create his exhibits called "Body Worlds", they're now playing in Chicago and Cleveland after a run in L.A.

Visitor: "I think it's the most interesting thing I've ever experienced in my life."

The shows have been immensely popular around the world, raking in hundreds of millions of dollars. With that kind of money at stake, copy cat shows not produced by von Hagens were inevitable, including the one at San Francisco's Masonic Center.

Bob Henry, Int'l Society for Plastination: "This is what we feared would happen sooner or later, and it's upon us, I believe."

Officials from the International Society for Plastination are concerned about 'The Universe Within'. They've had difficulty finding out who's behind the exhibit. The I-Team posed that question to Alan Casalou, the Masonic Center's executive director.

Allan Casalou, Masonic Exec. Dir.: "It's a collaboration of people that are working with the two universities, one in Beijing and one in Vienna."

Actually, both universities tell the I-Team they knew nothing about the exhibit until we called. When we tried to follow up with just basic questions, Casalou's PR person pulled him away.

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "I want to ask you a question about the bodies. Could I ask you about the bodies?"

Allan Casalou, Masonic Exec. Dir.: ""No."

The I-Team did find out who brought these bodies to San Francisco. It's Gerhard Perner, a TV producer from Austria, and his partner, Tom Lancia, a building contractor from Las Vegas. Their last project? Bringing Shaolin monks from China to the MGM Grand Hotel-Casino on the Vegas strip. And now, their body show in San Francisco has some problems.

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "Why are the bodies leaking?"

Gerhard Perner: "What means leaking?"

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "Moisture coming out."

Gerhard Perner: "Some silicone, it's a temperature thing."

The I-Team spotted moisture beading up across faces, dripping inside chest cavities, and pooling beneath feet. Plastination experts tell us, it's evidence of a rush job.

Bob Henry, Int'l Society for Plastination: "It appears to be a classic example of someone not understanding the process and not realizing that it literally takes months to prepare a nice specimen."

The I-Team took samples from the bodies and sent them to a lab. It's silicone from the plastination process and liquefied human fat. The bodies were not degreased properly before they were filled with plastic.

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "There's a drip."

After the I-Team contacted San Francisco's director of public health this week, he sent inspectors to the exhibit, ordered his own tests on the fluids, and gave Gerhard Perner until the close of business tomorrow (Thursday) to provide documentation that the bodies were preserved properly.

Dr. Mitchell Katz: "If they are unwilling to produce that documentation, then we would take further steps which could include trying to close the place down."

The other issue is where did the bodies come from?

For Gunther von Hagens, it's volunteers. He has a list of 6,000 who've already signed up to be part of his exhibit after they die. Von Hagens says it's important for visitors to know, these people wanted their bodies to be used this way.

Gunther von Hagens: "Like he's talking to me, I was what you are now, and you can become what I am, a plastinate. Then the message is more profound, it goes beneath the skin."

Gerhard Perner has a different approach for his Masonic Center show.

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "Where did you get the bodies?"

Gerhard Perner: "From the Medical University in Beijing from the Museum of Life Sciences."

Again, officials at the medical university in Beijing tell us that's not true, they "have no relationship with Mr. Gerhard Perner."

The I-Team has learned Perner acquired the bodies from this factory in Nanjing. It normally supplies specimens to medical schools, the brochure offers a plastinated pigeon, a dog's stomach, a panda skeleton, or a child's body.

Anita Silvers is a medical ethicist from San Francisco State who questions Perner using bodies destined for medical research or teaching.

Anita Silvers: "So, the issue is not what the use is but whether the individual or the family standing surrogate for the individual understood and approved of what exactly the use is."

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "They probably meant for that body to teach medical students, they didn't mean for it to be on display here."

Gerhard Perner: "They donated for research and teaching."

ABC7's Dan Noyes: "Is this research and teaching?"

Gerhard Perner: "This is included in the goals of the university."

The university is considering legal action against Perner and the Masonic Center to make them stop using its name. And, San Francisco supervisor Fiona Ma is trying to shut down the show. She says bodies from China being used this way goes against Chinese culture.

Fiona Ma: "The Chinese are typically very religious, they're spiritual, they're very private, and if they knew that their bodies were being used like this for commercial exploitation purposes, they wouldn't be happy."

Thirty-four thousand people have toured the Masonic show in its first month. It's scheduled to run through September, but tonight on ABC7 News at 11, there are new calls from City Hall to close the body exhibit. Also, the I-Team explores how the 20 bodies and other specimens from China arrived through Customs at the Port of Oakland.

http://abclocal.go.com/kgonews/iteam/052505_iteam_body_one.html