

CATHY Controversial comedian Dave Chappelle has another show tonight at the Varsity Theater in Minneapolis. About 50 protesters met fans waiting to get into Chappelle's performance last night at the Varsity.

Chappelle was to perform at First Avenue, but that venue canceled the show just hours before he was to go on stage. There's been a whirlwind of outrage over the last-minute booking of the comedian in the Twin Cities. NPR news reporter Grace Birstengel is covering the controversy. She's with us right now. Hey, Grace.

GRACE Hey, Cathy. Thanks for having me.

BIRSTENGEL:

CATHY This all happened really fast, the booking, the cancelation, the show at the Varsity. What's the issue with
WURZER: Chappelle?

GRACE So to put it simply, the issue that people have with Dave Chappelle is that he regularly mocks transgender
BIRSTENGEL: people in his comedy routines. And he has for a long time. This isn't just a one-time thing.

And they're not even really jokes. He's previously said that his views on gender are facts and that he won't apologize for anything he said. He often invalidates the existence of trans people. He jokes about their bodies and has compared being trans to wearing blackface.

I also just read the Star Tribune review from last night's show at the Varsity. And yes, turns out, he referred to the people protesting the show as transgender lunatics. And he also called monkeypox a gay disease, which it is, of course, not.

And I think the distinction here really is that he was booked at First Avenue. People are not under any sort of impression that Dave Chappelle will not be booked at any venues. But it's the fact that First Avenue has always really positioned itself as a place that has really strong LGBTQ allyship. They're very active during Pride Month. They sell branded merch with rainbows on it. So it's just really hurtful to the community for a place like First Avenue to book somebody who's just so blatantly transphobic.

CATHY So you've been talking, I know, to First Ave employees. What were they saying about the show?

WURZER:

GRACE Yeah, so the show was announced Monday. And on Tuesday evening, I met up with about eight event staff at
BIRSTENGEL: First Avenue who are all trans or queer or both. And they told me that the majority of event staff who are the folks at First Ave that take your tickets, that work the bar, do security, that the majority of them are within the LGBTQ community, and that this is really a slap in the face.

And it also means that if Dave Chappelle were to perform there, that many trans people would then have to work the show and hear attacks on their identity and serve people who support that kind of behavior who would go see Dave Chappelle. There's a stereotype within the community that companies put up Pride flags in June and then they burn them in July. And one of the staffers that I talked to mentioned that, and I think that's a bit true in this instance. Employees also said they couldn't believe that First Avenue announced this on such short notice and didn't talk to employees about it, and also mostly ignored emails that came in from concerned staff.

CATHY So the pressure to cancel just didn't come from the employees, right?

WURZER:

GRACE No, definitely not. If you were on Twitter all in the past couple of days and you live around here, you probably
BIRNSTENGEL: saw a lot of people speaking out about it. And a lot of local bands, too, were saying that they were really disappointed in First Avenue.

And then a local nonprofit called Reclaim which provides mental health support for queer and trans youth, they came out with a statement saying that they would no longer accept financial donations from First Avenue, which is significant because First Avenue chose Reclaim as the beneficiary of the profits from their 2022 Pride shirts. So they will not be accepting that money.

CATHY So what's First Avenue's management saying about all this?

WURZER:

GRACE Well, they released a statement yesterday on Facebook and Twitter that's a little vague. They didn't specifically
BIRNSTENGEL: call out transphobic comments, but just kind of said we hear you and we apologize for overseeing this. We're listening to you. So we're moving this to the Varsity Theater.

But they haven't said anything besides that. And I checked in with some staffers this morning, and they still haven't heard anything else from the venue. So it's really just the statement that you can see online.

CATHY Just curious here before you go, any staffers, what do they think about what appears to be kind of an apology?

WURZER:

GRACE Well, I think people are, of course, relieved that he's not performing at First Avenue anymore. But the folks that I
BIRNSTENGEL: talked to said it wasn't enough of an apology and they would like to see more action to make this right, that the apology read like saving face.

People are still really hurt and frustrated that this even happened in the first place. And again, the staff people I talked to would like to see First Avenue have a big conversation with staff about how this happened and to really hear people out, and for the venue to take some accountability for the future and how they might do things differently.

CATHY All right. Grace, thank you so much.

WURZER:

GRACE Thank you, Cathy.

BIRNSTENGEL:

CATHY Grace Birnstengel is a Digital Engagement Reporter for NPR News. Chapelle, by the way, is performing tonight
WURZER: and tomorrow at the Varsity Theater.