'Bodies' bring in bucks for exhibition company

by Penni Crabtree

When it comes to making money, there's little doubt that macabre sells.

Just take a gander at the financial reports for Premier Exhibitions, the Atlanta-based company with a controversial traveling show, "Bodies ... The Exhibition," now in San Diego. The exhibit features real human corpses that have been dissected, plasticized and posed.

BODIES BRINGS THE BUCKS - A preserved running corpse is one of the offerings in Premier Exhibitions' traveling series of exhibits called 'Bodies ... The Exhibition.' CNS Photo courtesy of PRNews. For years the publicly traded company put on a singularly lackluster financial performance as an exhibitor of relics from the Titanic. Hampered by legal challenges to its salvage rights on the wreck, shareholder lawsuits and expenses associated with the Titanic shows, Premier didn't begin turning a profit until it embraced cadavers.

Premier's first "pilot" show was held in England in 2004. The rollout really began in 2005, and since then an estimated 4 million visitors have paid to view Premier's "Bodies" shows, helping to propel the company to profitability - $5.3 million net income on revenue of $13 million in fiscal 2006.

Results were even better in the 2007 fiscal year that ended in February, with net income reaching $7.4 million on revenue of $30.1 million, more than 70 percent of which came from traveling exhibits of corpses and body parts.

Business is so good that Premier recently announced that it has obtained more sets of "human anatomical specimens" and will mount an additional six "Bodies" exhibits, bringing the total to 11 traveling shows.

"The overwhelming acceptance and continued demand for this blockbuster exhibition series has enabled us to achieve an incredible base of 11 exhibitions in total," company president Arnie Geller said in a written statement. "The obvious operating leverage created by having this amount of Bodies-related exhibitions should enable us to create material improvements in our 2008 fiscal year performance and beyond."

Premier did not return telephone calls requesting information about its business.

Along with Premier's success has come steady criticism from human rights groups, religious groups, medical associations and state governments about the macabre content of the show, the provenance of the bodies, which come mostly from China, and the ethics of profiting from such an enterprise.

Premier promotes the exhibition as educational, arguing that it helps people understand their bodies and, when coming face to face with, say, a smoker's dissected lung, may promote good health habits.

Some critics say Premier's exhibits, and those of several other companies that have jumped on the body bandwagon in the past decade, are more akin to the popular anatomy museums and P.T. Barnum-style freak shows that thrived in the United States, England and Australia in the 19th century.

"Human remains have long been a commodity of choice for entrepreneurs," medical historian Helen MacDonald of the University of Melbourne in Australia said in an e-mail. "The proprietors of these earlier shows rationalized them as having a high moral, rather than a commercial, purpose: they would improve the intellect, elevate the morals, even provide the evidence needed, in a scientific age, of the Divine Architect who had created the human body.

"But no one was really deceived. The crowds who flocked to these exhibitions didn't part with their hard-earned money to receive lessons. They were attracted by the way the shows skirted along the edges of respectability."

In San Diego, Premier's "Bodies" exhibit is being shown in a vacant department store where adults pony up $26.50 per ticket and children $18 to gaze at 21 whole-body cadavers - often posed in some activity and flayed to reveal levels of tissue and muscle - as well as more than 200 partial bodies or organs.

The cadavers are preserved in rubberized form through a process invented in the 1970s by German anatomist Gunther von Hagens, whose own "Body Worlds" traveling exhibit of cadavers, first launched in 1996, is a more established rival to Premier's offering.

The process involves dissecting the body according to the exhibits' needs, soaking it in acetone to replace the cellular water and then placing it in a vacuum chamber filled with liquid silicone or polyester resins.

Within the chamber, the acetone vaporizes and is replaced by the silicone or polymer mixture. Then the body is cured, leaving it rubbery and ready to be painted and posed.

Like their 19th-century counterparts, the promoters of the current crop of body shows also rationalize their product as educational, MacDonald said. While the exhibits can educate - the dissections are "usually wonderfully skilled" - other factors outweigh the value, she said.

Of particular concern are questions about the source of the bodies being displayed, many of which come from the city of Dalian, in China.

Officials from Dalian Medical University previously have been implicated in the use of executed prisoners for commercial purposes, including organ transplants, according to the Laogai Research Foundation, a Washington-based organization that documents human rights abuses in China.

Premier obtained many of its specimens from Dr. Sui Hongjin, who is associated with the university, and has a licensing agreement with Hongjin and an affiliated Chinese company Dalian Hoffen Bio Technique Co., according to company filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The company, which reportedly spent $25 million to obtain the specimens, maintains that the bodies, which are mostly Chinese men, are those of unclaimed or unidentified Chinese that were obtained legally.

Harry Wu, director of the Laogai Research Foundation, said that in China "a paper document can be created very easily, and you never know if it is legitimate."

"China has thousands of executions a year and the government never releases any information about them - even the families aren't given notice about an execution until after the execution," Wu said. "We never know where a cadaver comes from, whether it was donated or obtained illegally."

Wu termed Premier's practice of obtaining its exhibit specimens from China "immoral."

"Yes, it is profitable, but it is immoral," Wu said. "If I told you that your brother is No. 5 in the exhibit, how would you feel? The dead have rights. These people did not agree to give their body or body parts, and the dead should not be used for commercial interests."

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