

The Palestinian Glib and Oily Art against Israel

by Michael Curtis



The Merchant of Venice performed by the Haibima National Theater Company

It is gratifying to know that some individuals, scholars and artists can keep their heads while all about them are losing theirs. On June 14, 2017 members of the Modern Language Association, voted by 1954 to 885 to refrain from endorsing the boycott of Israeli universities. A year earlier, the American Anthropological Association, though by a small majority, similarly voted down a resolution to boycott Israeli academic institutions.

Now, Debora Spar, President of the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in New York has repudiated an explicit argument for censorship in rejecting the call in a letter of

July 5, 2017 by Palestinian and related groups and anti-Israeli activists to cancel "Israeli government-sponsored" performances by two Israeli theater companies, Haibima National Theater and the Cameri Theater of Tel-Aviv, at the Center in July 2017. The letter called on Lincoln Center "to respect the Palestinian civil society call for a boycott of those Israeli cultural institutions that are complicit in the denial of Palestinian rights." The letter was in fact initiated by the New York City Palestinian rights group Adalah-NY: The New York Campaign for the Boycott of Israel.

Their false rationale for this call for censorship was that the performances would be taking place "with support of Israel's Office of Cultural Affairs in North America." Their petition was based on the perverted conclusion that this support means not simply apolitical patronage but is a calculated effort to mask Israeli repression of the Palestinian people.

The fallacy is twofold. First, the Israeli Embassy was not trying to manipulate public opinion through its support: it was simply paying for the costs of the theater groups as government agencies do in the United States. The second fallacy is ironic: the play, the subject of the censorship, is *"To the End of the Land,"* which stems from an anti-war novel by David Grossman, a left wing activist Israeli writer often critical of Israeli policies in the West Bank.

President Spar issued an enlightened defense of the productions. She rebuffed this call of censorship of Israel and decided not to cancel the performances, writing "we seek to bring a wide range of ideas and voices to our stages each year...we do not make political statements and hope that the art we present can stand on its own."

Palestinian and fellow-travelling other groups concerned to make political statements by boycott, BDS, of Israel reveal have no such belief in a "wide range of ideas." Their narrow

perspective was shown on March 29, 2012 when the English paper, *The Guardian*, published an open letter signed by 37 theater people protesting "with dismay and regret," the decision of Shakespeare's Globe Theater to invite the Israeli company *Habima* to participate in an international Shakespeare festival at the Globe.

With a bizarre contention that even Einstein would not have been able to comprehend, the 37 held that because the Israeli troupe had once performed in the settlement of Kiryat Arba in Hebron, *Habima* participation would make the Globe festival complicit with "human rights violations and the illegal colonization of occupied land."

To its credit, the Globe management in a careful, moderated defense of free speech allowed the *Habima's* performance, of the *Merchant of Venice*, to go ahead, concluding that "active exclusion was a profoundly problematic stance to take because the question of which nations deserve inclusion or exclusion is necessarily subjective.. people meeting and talking and exchanging views is preferable to isolation and silence."

The attack on free expression in essence stems from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement initiated by Palestinian groups in 2005. The movement has been the spur for anti-Israeli activity though its members show little concern for any specific improvements for Palestinians in the disputed areas.

The crucial question is why do gifted intellectuals, writers, and performers continue to participate in manifestations of Palestinian propaganda, the antithesis of their own professional values. The more than 60 signers of the letter of July 5, 2017 to the Chairman of the Board and the President of Lincoln Center to cancel Israeli government-sponsored performances by two Israeli companies included Kathleen Chalfant, Caryl Churchill, Ken Loach, and Lynn Nottage, winner of two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. Can these gifted

people really believe the Palestinian argument that performances in New York by the *Habima National Theater* and the *Cameri Theater* of Tel Aviv are “part of Israel’s strategy to employ arts and culture to divert attention from Israel’s “decades of violent colonization, brutal military occupation and denial of basic rights to the Palestinian people?”

Do they really accept the Palestinian diatribe that the theater troupes are the “pretty face” of Israel, an image presented so that Israel is not thought of in the context of war, but is making cynical use of the arts to cover up decades of denying Palestinian rights? If they do not believe this nonsense, they should deny it and assert the principles of free expression which the State of Israel is alone in the Middle East in illustrating.

Plato in *The Republic* wrote of the “bold flight of invention,” usually recast as the “noble lie” that induces people to accept convenient fictions. Plato may have been correct in saying that such a fiction was not happening in his day but wrong in concluding it would be hard to persuade anyone that they could ever happen again.

Popular support for totalitarian regimes in the 20th century illustrate the reality. Intellectuals including George Bernard Shaw, G.D.H. Cole, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, among many others, were guilty of the noble lie, in trying to persuade fellow citizens that the Stalinist Soviet Union was not a system pervaded by terror, mass executions, slave labor, gulags, and hunger, but was a new Civilization.

For some time, advocates of the boycott of Israel have used the noble lie to influence well-meaning people genuinely interested in human rights. One case in question in 2017 is an attempt at censorship by literary figures at the annual World Voices Festival of PEN America. More than 240 well known writers, poets, and publishers, many of them familiar from earlier BDS events, called for rejection of funding to the

festival from the Israel Embassy. Among them were Lucy Lippard, Michael Ondaatje, Alice Walker, Louise Erdrich, Junot Diaz, and Cornel West. The Embassy planned to contribute a small sum to help the expenses of airfare and hotels for Israeli writers selected to participate in the festival.

PEN International has been outspoken in the past, criticizing the Israeli government "for the killings and the reported deliberate targeting of certain journalists, media organizations, and their infrastructures, and the practice of administrative detention against journalists and other writers. At first, in 2017 Pen American Center said it was maintaining the Israeli contribution because it was against "cultural boycotts of any kind...and there was a need to promote dialogue." But, as a result of pressure, the festival did proceed without Israeli government funding.

It is appropriate to ask if the signatories to the PEN letter who in addition to those named above, also includes Angela Davis, Russell Banks, and Breyten Breytenbach, realize and approve the fact that they are engaging not only in a cultural boycott, but in an act in violation of all principles of free expression. Do they understand they are puppets of a well-organized political movement that is not averse to antisemitism?

The July 7, 2017 letter to Lincoln Center offers a false, hypocritical and specious argument that it is not raising concerns about any artistic content or nationality but rather about a repressive state agenda that repeatedly violates international law.

The basic problem is that the signatories of the letter, BDS advocates, know so little, if anything of international law or of the realities of the Middle East. Information of a few of the realities might help them. They should be aware that Palestinian authorities are gross violators of international law. The Palestinian Authority glorifies murderers and pays

salaries to terrorists. An example of this is that one murderer Karim Younes, now imprisoned, has on May 2017 been appointed a member of the Central Committee of Fatah. Younes, an Israeli Arab, kidnapped and murdered an Israeli soldier in 1980.

In his meeting with PA President Mahmoud Abbas in May 2017 President Donald Trump raised questions about the payments to Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli jails and to their families, who committed acts of terrorism. Abbas who had actually raised salaries to the terrorist prisoners in 2010, refused to change policy.

PEN members who wield a pen rather than a sword, should be less concerned with the payment of Israeli air fares, and more with the over 30 schools named after terrorists, including the notorious former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseni, a Nazi collaborator who lived in Germany during World War II and met with Adolf Hitler in December 1941. Do they think that terrorists and antisemites are desirable role models for Palestinian children?