

September 12, 2018

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Dear A.C.T. leadership and production team:

We write with deep concerns about your upcoming production of J.T. Rogers' play OSLO, which your website suggests will help with "finding common ground". We fear that this production will tend to polarize rather than bring people together. Many of us have read the published script and we find that the play not only confirms negative stereotypes held by those in positions of privilege, but also ignores and marginalizes the voices of those already ignored and marginalized.

1.

As the introduction to the published script confirms, the play began with the playwright's meeting and being charmed by the Norwegian initiators of the Oslo process. The play is founded — as the Oslo process was founded — on the viewpoint of Northern European outsiders, and therefore is infected with the overt and covert racism against Arabs and Palestinians that pervades European societies. At no time in the play do the protagonists realize or address this about themselves.

The playwright apparently followed with interviews of many others, but the resulting script still centers the memories and viewpoints of those two Norwegians. The choice tends to position the European protagonists as white saviors who are needed to resolve an issue that the quarreling sides can't manage for themselves. This also confirms the common stereotype that the whole conflict is a long-term feud between short-tempered Mediterranean people who must be schooled and wrangled by Europe and the US. This white savior mentality — obnoxious and insulting to both Palestinians and Israelis — is assumed without question by the playwright and the protagonists.

2.

Presenting the conflict as a long-term feud is historically inaccurate and obscures the fundamental situation: one people has power over another people. Ignoring this basic imbalance tends to equalize the suffering of oppressed and oppressor. This ongoing equalization is deeply traumatic to Palestinians everywhere, while further confirming stereotypes held by people of privilege in Israel as well as the U.S.

3.

The anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian and pro-Israel prejudices in the play are ubiquitous and unchallenged. Yitzhak Rabin, who participated in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948 and ordered the breaking of bones of Palestinian teenagers in the late 1980s, is referred to not as a war criminal but as a bold and visionary statesman. Shimon Peres

enters late the play as a heroic paternal leader. Yasser Arafat, on the other hand, is left offstage and constantly referred to as either a clown with funny gestures and incomprehensible speech, or “a bloodstained terrorist”, one of those who “bomb your markets and blow up your buses”. (It happens that bombing Arab markets was a tactic used by pre-Israel Zionist militants.) The comparison of Arafat to Hitler is tacitly accepted by the protagonists. This consistent characterization is not redeemed by the later reference to the still-offstage Arafat having a good memory and being maybe not as stupid as they had assumed.

Israelis are often presented as impatient grownups forced to explain basic civilization to Arabs. The Arab negotiators are portrayed as stodgy, unwilling to hear even the idlest criticism of their Chairman Arafat, and often given to expressing themselves in terms of physical violence, often referring to lethal violence on each other “back home”. The play even traffics in the common but outrageous stereotype that Arabs lack humor and can’t tell jokes — until they are schooled in this by contact with Europeans.

It may be that Terje Rod-Larsen and Mona Juul genuinely remember and reported interactions along these lines, but of course those were filtered through their prejudices and again through the prejudices of the playwright. As with all stereotypes, one may occasionally cite examples that appear to confirm them; but the playwright has either selected or invented all these interactions with no responsibility to the prevailing hostility in this country toward Arabs and Palestinians. If these examples seem minor or doubtful to you, then we beg you to examine your own attitudes toward Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians, and to remember that racism against them goes widely unchallenged in our society.

The playwright clearly has the good intention of bringing his conflicting characters to understand and sympathize with the “Other”, but neither the playwright nor the protagonists ever realize or come to grips with the fact that they themselves come from a place of prejudice against Arabs and Palestinians. This unacknowledged prejudice causes the play — like the Oslo process — to ignore the power imbalance central to the conflict and to accept the viewpoint of those in power: that the conflict is about lack of communication, rather than imbalance of power.

4.

The play presents another stereotype by asking the audience to believe that the Oslo accords were a valuable step toward justice, only failing because there was not enough follow-through. The play thus ignores the overwhelming experience of Palestinians both in the Occupied Territories and the global Palestinian diaspora. Some Palestinians were happy enough at the time to be granted some cosmetic trappings of government: uniforms, guns, a flag, the return of some former leaders from exile. But by and large, Palestinians — and those of us who were in the Occupied Territories in 1993 — understood even at the time that the Oslo agreement was nothing more than a vaguely worded document that would serve to maintain and extend Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and thus to consolidate control under a system of apartheid: two laws for two peoples under one government.

As an example, the well-respected Palestinian human rights organization al-Haq, based in Ramallah, analyzed the Oslo agreement as soon as it was published in 1993, and concluded “It is difficult to envisage any scenario flowing from [Oslo] in which Israel will not retain ultimate jurisdiction and control over the Occupied Territories.” The so-called Palestinian Authority created by the agreement would be “subject to Israeli veto and control” and since Israeli military orders would continue to be the law of the land, “human rights violations will continue to occur”. Israel retained the right to enter any Palestinian area at any time, and with Israeli military courts still having jurisdiction over Palestinians, al-Haq predicted “a discriminatory system... reminiscent of apartheid practices... [that fail] to recognize the equality of persons before the law.”

These predictions have proven correct, as Israel has maintained and hardened its regime of land confiscation, settlements, and apartheid. The so-called Palestinian Authority has only become more blatantly what it was always designed to be: a subcontractor of Israeli military occupation authorities, collaborating in the ongoing oppression of Palestinians.

The notion that Palestinians — a highly educated and politically experienced people — must gradually learn how to govern themselves, or be trained, or earn the right to do so in stages, is profoundly racist and is accepted without question by the script.

5.

Much is made in the script of the supposedly failing Madrid negotiations which needed to be saved by the back-channel Oslo negotiations. In fact, those Madrid front-channel negotiations, for all their failings, were conducted by Palestinians actually living in the West Bank and Gaza, with large participation by female Palestinian leaders. The Oslo process brought back the already-questionable Palestinian leadership-in-exile, which was almost exclusively male-led, to displace the rising local leadership. The script leaves out a key reason for the success of the Oslo accords: to guarantee return from exile, the Palestinian leadership-in-exile was willing to make more concessions to Israel than would have been acceptable to representatives of the movement from the West Bank and Gaza.

The return of the male-led leadership in exile almost entirely sidelined the local grassroots and women-led leadership that had arisen during the popular Palestinian intifada.

6.

Three times during the play there is mention of violent events in Israel and the Occupied Territories that intrude on the action of the story. The first two are acts of Palestinian violence, one accompanied by mutilation. The third is an act of Israeli violence, but framed as military action against Hezbollah militants. This proportion does not represent the reality of the time, when both Israeli and Palestinian human-rights groups were documenting significantly more ongoing violence by Israeli soldiers and settlers against Palestinian civilians, including attacks, assassinations, home demolitions, and torture in prison. Israeli violence has always been starkly under-reported in US media, and

Palestinian violence over-reported. The play shares and participates in this appalling and counterfactual bias.

7.

The script carelessly conveys an outright historical falsehood about Gaza. One would assume from the text and from the comments in the epilogue that the Oslo accord caused the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza. Nothing of the sort happened as part of the Oslo accords. Much later in 2005, Israeli troops were re-deployed to the border of Gaza, and that was by Ariel Sharon who was a strong opponent of the Oslo agreements. This is not a minor point. Many un-informed people in the U.S. were made to believe that Sharon's action in 2005 was another step toward Palestinian statehood; but in fact, the removal of Israeli settlers and re-deployment of Israeli troops was done by Sharon for the stated intent of consolidating Israel's permanent control of the West Bank, while keeping Gaza surrounded, controlled and imprisoned.

8.

The epilogue of the play, in its spoken list of subsequent events, astonishingly fails to mention one of the crucial facts of the post-Oslo period: that Yitzhak Rabin immediately accelerated the confiscating of Palestinian land and the building of illegal Israeli settlements.

For all these reasons and more — we have a list of other problematic citations from the script — OSLO will mainly confirm your audience's negative stereotypes about Arabs and Palestinians, and will confirm much of your audience's misunderstanding that the situation is an ancient feud rather than a system of injustice.

We hope you won't make matters worse by telling us that the play will stimulate dialogue and that all dialogue is good. The play does not bring disparate voices together, but instead privileges the uncritical voices of the architects of an agreement that further disenfranchised the oppressed, while sidelining the voices of those already unheard. Post-show panels do not make up for that. Some local people will come to see it, some will find ways to protest, some will not want to subject themselves to more of the ongoing trauma of silencing.

Your choice to produce the play implicitly validates its approach and its confirming of stereotypes, and this is particularly irresponsible and inflammatory in the current environment, as Israel passes laws declaring itself an ethnic-religious supremacist state and employs lethal force with impunity against Palestinian protest.

We haven't heard from any local Palestinian-Americans that you consulted with them before finalizing the choice of this play, and we would be interested to hear if you did so.

Some of us are writers, poets, and playwrights ourselves, and we support you in presenting material that challenges your audience. This material will not challenge any but the small highly-vocal minority of right-wing supporters of the right-wing government of Israel, those who want no criticism of Israel at all. For the great majority,

this material will confirm subtle negative stereotypes about Palestinians, Muslims and Arabs. We appreciate that you made this choice most likely from a lack of understanding, but you need to understand the consequences of programming material that does not support social justice but rather supports an unjust status quo.

With great concern,

Ramzy Baroud, writer

Linda Bevis, formerly attorney with Al-Haq

Karam Dana, Associate Professor, University of Washington Bothell

Hanna Eady, playwright

Nada Elia, writer

Huda Giddens, Kairos Puget Sound Coalition

Will Hanna, musician

Sibyl James, poet

Lena Khalaf-Tuffaha, poet

Peter Lippman, writer

Beth Mahmoud-Howell, director

Yusef Mahmoud-Howell, actor

Jen Marlowe, playwright

Edward Mast, playwright

Ruth McRee, actor

Amin Odeh, Voices for Palestine

Mary Segall, Kairos Puget Sound Coalition

Manal Al-Sharif, artist

(Institutional affiliations are for identification purposes only.)