

Letter on cancellation of “My Name is Rachel Corrie” in Toronto

4 January 2007

It was announced recently in the *Globe & Mail* that the Toronto-based CanStage, one of Canada’s leading theatres, has decided to drop the controversial play “My Name is Rachel Corrie” [about the American student killed by an Israeli military bulldozer in March 2003] from next year’s playbill. We here in Toronto’s theatre community were excited when we read in the *Toronto Star* in November that Martin Bragg, artistic producer at CanStage, was about to close a deal for the rights to the play for his 2007-2008 season. But it seems that interference from CanStage’s Board of Directors has forced the show to be dropped from the proposed schedule.

Over the holidays, the *Toronto Star* reported that members of Bragg’s board, including veteran “cultural activist” Bluma Appel, whose name is affixed to CanStage’s main theatre, opposed the play as it could produce “a negative reaction” in Toronto’s Jewish community. This was not the first time the play has received short shrift in Toronto. A public reading of the piece at the University of Toronto was forced “underground” this past summer after fears that it would be disrupted by pro-Zionist advocates.

Martin Bragg attempted to explain away his abrupt turn-about by saying that although he was “emotionally moved” by reading the piece, his viewing of the show recently in New York changed his mind when the play “fell flat.” Certainly, that has not been the impression of critics in both London and New York, where the show has been staged to much fanfare.

I have just seen the play in New York City with my husband and we were greatly moved by the production. Actor Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, editor of the *Guardian’s* Weekend Magazine, are responsible for bringing Rachel Corrie’s journals to the stage. It has been performed at Britain’s Royal Court Theatre and was performing at the Minetta Lane Theatre in NYC.

The night we saw “Rachel Corrie” the theatre was packed and Rickman was there along with actors Jessica Lange and Sam Shepherd. The actress portraying Corrie was Megan Dodds and she was terrific, bringing her character fully to life.

The play is about a young 23-year-old woman from Olympia, Washington, who had a powerful social conscience at a very young age and decided to follow through on her passion by joining other foreign nationals working for the International Solidarity Movement and going to Gaza to defend the homes of Palestinians in 2003. She was killed by an Israeli bulldozer on March 16 of that same year.

The most powerful piece in the play comes near the end when she pleads, “A lot of the time the kindness of the people here, coupled with the willful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I can’t believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry. What we are paying for here is truly evil. Maybe the general growing class imbalance in the world and consequent devastation of working people’s lives is a bigger evil. This has to stop. I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop.”

The magnificent speech at the end combined with the visuals and stage direction made a huge impact on me and my husband and, yes, much of the audience on that particular evening. As we left the theatre, we noted how engrossed fellow theatre-goers were in conversation about the play—even right down into the subway and amongst couples sitting in the train. The power of the show stood out starkly against the small band of supporters of the Israeli state who had organized an “informational picket” in front of the theatre as we went in.

I believe the decision-makers at Toronto’s CanStage Theatre have shamelessly buckled to pressure from

forces that are antithetical to not only artistic freedom, but, much more fundamentally, to the human rights of the Palestinian people and indeed, to the very life and beautiful idealism of Rachel Corrie herself.

At the end of the play, on a television set there is a recording of the transcript of an eyewitness account by Tom Dale:

“Rachel walked to place herself in between the home and the bulldozer. As the bulldozer turned towards them, it had about 20 metres or 10 seconds clear time directly with her in its view to see where she was. It continued toward her at some pace with a mound of earth building up in front of it. And as the mound of earth reached Rachel she obviously felt that in order to keep her balance, to keep her footing she had to climb on to this mound of earth to prevent being overwhelmed by it. When she did this it put her head and shoulders clearly above the top of the bulldozer blade and therefore clearly in the view of the bulldozer driver, so he knew absolutely that she was there.”

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