

To speak the truth without being afraid: My Name Is Rachel Corrie on stage in New York

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My Name Is Rachel Corrie by Alan Rickman and Katherine Vinter, directed by Alan Rickman, at the Minetta Lane Theatre, New York City, October 15—December 30, 2006.

My Name Is Rachel Corrie: Taken from the Writings of Rachel Corrie, by Alan Rickman and Katherine Vinter, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006, 60 pp.

Rachel Corrie was a 23-year-old American student from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, who joined the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) protest group to oppose the evictions of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

On March 16, 2003, an IDF bulldozer crushed her to death as she stood in front of it, attempting to block the demolition of a house belonging to Dr. Samir Nasrallah. The Palestinian's house was being destroyed as part of the construction of Israel's so-called "security wall." Rachel Corrie's murder was a part of a campaign of political violence instigated by the Zionist regime against foreign ISM members and journalists around the time of the US invasion of Iraq.

My Name Is Rachel Corrie is a one-woman play that uses the texts of Rachel's diary entries and e-mails. It was performed with great success at the Royal Court Theatre in London, where it won several awards.

Zionist pressure and the cowardice of a number of producers, however, delayed the play's performance in North America (and still delay it in Toronto). Notable was the cancellation of the play at the New York Theater Workshop; artistic director James Nicola issued a dissembling statement justifying the play's "postponement."

After seeing it, one understands why the Zionists are afraid of the play. It is an unflinching exposure of the conditions under which ordinary Palestinians live in the Israeli-occupied territories and the response that it can evoke among thinking American youth.

The play opens in Rachel's apartment in Olympia, Washington. On the floor of the set are scattered clothes, books, and a space heater. It is familiar to anyone who has

messy young friends or children. Rachel is sleeping under the blankets and pokes a limb up as the scene opens. A sense of vibrant youth emanates from her, aptly expressed by actor Bree Elrod.

A liberal, pacifistic, and somewhat romantic outlook dominates her thought. She wants to live for eternity with e.e. cummings, not Byron, with Jesus, not Karl Marx, with Zelda but not F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Rachel (Elrod) reads aloud journals from earlier years: an intense love of her family comes across, although she contests her parents' political opinions and lifestyles. She tells us how she indifferently wears polyester, sometimes torn denim, sometimes nothing. She has an expansive spirit and relates how on an airplane she sees a beautiful sunrise and cries because it is not enough.

Objective social conditions radicalize her: those rounded up and held incommunicado after September 11, the arrest of Jose Padilla and the nature of American foreign policy. She says, "We can choose which side of history we want to be on now, and how willing we are to fight. We are not outside."

How to fight is the problem (though the writers do not highlight this). She goes to the city council with the homeless, speaks at meetings, dances in protest rallies. As a job, she cares for the mentally ill. None of this is enough. Life and struggle in Olympia don't satisfy her. She is not a theoretical person, but she is horrified, jolted by the things going on in the world. She feels isolated.

Because she "is missing a connection with the people who are impacted by US foreign policy," she decides to go to the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip with the ISM.

The next scene takes place during the last six weeks of Rachel's life. The set is a bombed-out building surrounded by shadows. The walls are full of bullet holes. Rachel sits on a broken wall and narrates her journal entries or at times perches on a chair behind an old computer and reads e-mails.

In Rafah in the Gaza Strip, she is struck by the poverty of people, by the hours-long waits at checkpoints, by IDF demands for identification from ordinary Palestinians,

although not from her. “I’m sort of embarrassed by how long it takes me in my gut to realize that people live like this,” she writes.

The ISM members are wanted everywhere to curb Israeli violence: in houses slated for demolition, around the single working well in town. At one point she and other internationals go to the Egyptian border to collect the corpse of a Palestinian man. The IDF shoots at the group, and then a bulldozer piles up an embankment of dirt in front of them.

Equally telling is the fortitude and kindness of the Palestinian families she stays with. They share their food and in one case even try to persuade her to stop smoking. It is, she says, an “intense tutelage in the ability of people to organize against all odds, to resist against all odds.”

The harsh conditions in Gaza wear on her. Sick to her stomach of the Israel occupation, she writes to her mother. She questions the hypocrisy of those who simply berate Palestinians for violent responses to the world’s fourth-largest military power. “If any of us had our lives and welfare completely strangled and lived with children in a shrinking place where we know that soldiers and tanks and bulldozers could come for us at any moment...do you not think most people would defend themselves as best they could?”

On a television set, eyewitness Tom Dale narrates her death. Although the driver of the bulldozer can see her clearly as she stands in front of his vehicle, “you see one, then both of her feet disappear.” The bulldozer leaves its blade down as it withdraws over her body. Blood covers her face, and, hemorrhaging, Rachel Corrie dies in the ambulance a few minutes later.

The play ends with a video of Rachel at a school conference, aged 10, telling an audience to stop world hunger. “We have to understand that these deaths are preventable,” she says. Her final words are “the potential of tomorrow.”

The audience is quiet as it gathers up its belongings. It is easy to know what people are feeling: shame, anger and grief. Some are asking themselves why this young woman had to die.

The play bears the imprint everywhere of Rachel’s Corrie’s personality and her political decisions. It is powerful because it shows how terrible oppression can quicken a deep response in someone who is not directly involved.

The play’s authors modestly call themselves “editors” because the material they have taken is all from the journals and e-mails of Rachel Corrie herself. Of course, there was selection, placement, organization involved in creating the script, as well as theatrical decisions as to lighting, sets, costume, and, finally, the fine performance by actor Bree

Elrod, that made this a work of art and not a documentary.

For various reasons, Vinter and Rickman decided to use a minimum of artistic commentary. To a certain extent, this protects the authors from recriminations. It is clear that they aren’t inventing anything. And, as Vinter notes in an afterword to the book, they wanted to show Rachel as a whole human being, and not merely as a political symbol.

The strength of this play, nevertheless, is also its weakness. By producing a script only out of Rachel’s own words, the authors have made it more difficult to deliver another aspect of a political drama: the component of criticism. It is no disrespect to this courageous and principled young woman to look at her views and general outlook in a thoughtful and critical manner. She dedicated herself to making the world a better place. Her effort and sacrifice will no doubt encourage others to take the same path. Are there lessons from this tragic experience that would assist others, young and older? For example: Are honesty and integrity enough when confronted with immense and complex political and historical questions, as well as cruel opposition? What are the limitations of protest politics?

In the theater piece, due to its limited structure, the political character of Rachel’s resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is not addressed. The ISM is a non-violent protest group that has been unable to stop Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip. IDF troops were withdrawn in 2005 only to reappear a year later, murderously. Would it not be possible for a theater piece, without providing simplistic answers, to visit this issue?

Vinter and Rickman are not obligated to present solutions to political problems in *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*. But a political life—and that is what Rachel Corrie’s life was, after all—is not whole without some sort of an objective assessment.

The beautiful and tragic expression of bravery, steadfastness and self-sacrifice in a struggle against oppression is not new. The history of feelings and ideas similar to Rachel Corrie’s stretches back a long time. The consideration of a certain political tradition, and its accompanying problems, is more or less cut off in the play. This general political reticence on the part of the “editors,” while understandable, weakens the piece somewhat.



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