

Lifetime award for noted British playwright Caryl Churchill cancelled in “anti-Semitism” smear

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The cancellation of a lifetime award for eminent British playwright Caryl Churchill because of her support for Palestinian rights is a disgraceful slander and act of censorship. The decision is the result of more than a decade of political vilification of Churchill as part of a broader right-wing campaign to recast anti-Zionism and any criticism of the state of Israel as anti-Semitic.

The 84-year-old Churchill is a leading figure in British theatre, with plays like *Serious Money* (about the Thatcherite finance capital boom) and *A Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (based on the Putney Debates during the English Civil War). A long-standing vocal critic of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians, she is a prominent supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian rights.

More than 170 actors, lawyers, writers and producers have signed a powerful open letter as Artists for Palestine defending her against “modern-day McCarthyism” and highlighting the attack on her legal rights. Signatories include Breyten Breytenbach, Stephen Daldry, Brian Eno, Stephen Frears, Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, Miriam Margolyes, Maxine Peake, Miranda Richardson, Kae Tempest and Harriet Walter.

Human rights lawyer Sir Geoffrey Bindman KC said withdrawal of Churchill’s award “on the ground of her support for BDS plainly violates her right to freedom of expression protected by Article 10 of the European Human Rights Convention.”

The courage of the signatories in the face of a vicious campaign which will inevitably be turned against them is significant.

The European Drama award, worth €75,000, is presented by Schauspiel Stuttgart, and sponsored by the German state of Baden-Württemberg’s Ministry of Science, Research and Arts. This month, the jury retracted its April decision and cancelled Churchill’s lifetime achievement award, claiming it had been “made aware of previously unknown information.”

Schauspiel’s was an explicitly political attack. It wrote “we have meanwhile become aware of the author’s signatures in support of boycott, divestment and sanctions.”

Churchill stood proudly by her “support for BDS and Palestinians.” A 2001 performance of her *Far Away* raised money for Palestinian theatres. She is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, which adopted the policy of BDS that year. Claims that this was “previously unknown information” are a transparent lie.

The open letter in defence of Churchill notes that the goals of the

BDS movement—“ending the occupation, full equality to the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the right of return of Palestinian refugees—adhere to international law.” Zionists, outraged at any criticism of the state of Israel, routinely smear BDS as anti-Semitic.

Mike Leigh wrote, “I stand with Caryl Churchill in her totally justified support of the struggle of the Palestinian people against the Israeli apartheid regime. For the Schauspiel Stuttgart to rescind its prestigious award is irresponsible, illiberal and ignorant; the decision reeks of the very fascism it affects to oppose.”

Director Dominic Cooke said that “drawing attention to Israel’s human rights abuses and its illegal occupation of Palestinian territory is not antisemitic, it is legitimate protest. We must defend artists’ right to comment on it, and on any other abuse of power in the world, without their being subject to defamatory abuse and vile slurs.”

Schauspiel repeated attacks on Churchill’s 2009 *Seven Jewish Children*, a 10-minute piece, directed by Cooke, responding to 2008’s Operation Cast Lead. That bombardment of Gaza killed at least 1,383 Palestinians, most of them civilians, including 333 children, according to Amnesty International’s figures. Just 13 Israelis were killed, three of them civilians, in this one-sided slaughter. A United Nations inquiry concluded that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) committed war crimes and possible crimes against humanity.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) rejected a Palestinian Authority (PA) request that Israel be investigated for this. It said it could not hear the request because the PA is only a UN “observer,” not a state.

Churchill’s play sought to trace an ideological route from the horrors of the Holocaust to the repression of the Palestinians. Enraged Zionists, looking to exonerate Israel’s war crimes, attacked Churchill for referring to “Jewish,” not “Israeli” or “Zionist,” children. A tendency that routinely claims to speak for *all* Jews rested its entire case on this absurd premise—even though the narrative, dealing with the Holocaust, begins before Israel was even formed.

The *Jewish Chronicle* has called what they admit is Churchill’s “humanitarian response to the atrocious death of Palestinians in Gaza” a “crime against humanity” and “inhumane”—and not the deaths of 333 children.

Cooke said correctly that the “confected outrage... was designed to... scare possible critics... into silence.”

A broad swathe of the liberal establishment is now fully on board with this Zionist slander of anti-Zionists. Schauspiel says *Seven Jewish Children* “can also be regarded as being anti-Semitic.”

Churchill called this out, saying her play “is critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians; it is not an attack on all Jews, many of whom are also critical of Israeli policy. It is wrong to conflate Israel with all Jews. A political play has made political enemies, who attack it with slurs of anti-Semitism.”

Criticism of Israel’s apartheid policies as anti-Semitic was given quasi-legal authority by the revised International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) Working Definition of Anti-Semitism, adopted in 2016 in the face of legal and human rights concerns. This enshrines the argument that Zionism is the legitimate and unchallengeable voice of the Jewish people and criticism of Zionism is therefore anti-Jewish.

Seven of its 11 illustrative examples of anti-Semitism relate to Israel, including:

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Drawing comparisons between contemporary Israeli policy and that of the Nazis.

The definition declares, “Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity.”

In 2018, Bindman said “the definition and the examples are poorly drafted, misleading, and in practice have led to the suppression of legitimate debate and freedom of expression.” Geoffrey Robertson KC said several examples were so loosely drafted as to likely impact on legitimate criticisms of the Israeli government and of human rights abuses against Palestinians.

Despite this, the IHRA has been widely adopted and used as a weapon against the left, for witch-hunting academics and students off campuses, and most prominently in the campaign waged to remove Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party and to expel many of those who joined the party based on support for his left-wing rhetoric, and who wanted to oppose the party’s Blairite right-wing.

The open letter places Schauspiel’s “outrageous turnaround” in the context of this ongoing “campaign that targets artists critical of Israel’s colonial violence,” raising “urgent questions about a pattern of intimidation and silencing in Germany, and beyond.”

It references a 2019 Bundestag resolution calling BDS anti-Semitic. This was denounced by many international authorities on anti-Semitism.

The art minister of the regional Green-Christian Democrat coalition government, Petra Olschowski, defended cancellation on the grounds of Germany’s “special historical responsibility. That is why we as a country take a clear and non-negotiable stance against any form of anti-Semitism.”

This moral posturing is routinely employed by the Greens to justify their support for German imperialism’s predatory military

ambitions, most recently in Ukraine where the NATO powers are in a direct alliance with fascists and genuine anti-Semites. But the German Greens are indifferent to the real threat of anti-Semitism from the right and anxious to join in any slander of those holding left-wing views.

The open letter champions the committed art for which Churchill is being attacked, declaring, “If the only forms of art deemed ‘safe’ for institutions are those that have nothing to say to the dispossessed and oppressed of this earth and that are silent in the face of state-sanctioned repression, then art and culture are emptied of meaning and value.”

The *Jewish Chronicle*’s editor Stephen Pollard called cancellation of the award “something to celebrate,” describing her play as an “outpouring of Jew-hate”.

In 2009 the paper argued that “a play that is critical of, and entirely populated by, characters from one community, can be defended only if it is written by a member of that community.”

An example of what this really means was provided by Israel Horovitz’s *What Strong Fences Make*, written explicitly against Churchill. Set in an Israel Defense Forces checkpoint, Horovitz presents a young Israeli soldier preventing a would-be Israeli suicide bomber from blowing himself up in the Occupied Territories in revenge for a Palestinian terrorist attack that killed members of his family.

To attack any left response, murderers are portrayed as heroes. Horovitz’s IDF soldier acts as a supposed bulwark of democracy in the face of outrages caused by Palestinian terrorists. The only caution is against fanatical Zionists being potentially driven to copy the desperate methods of the Palestinians. But they do not need to: the IDF and Israeli state wage murderous assaults on their behalf. This is where the bogus attacks on left-anti-Semitism leads—the strengthening of political and artistic reaction all along the line and the sanctioning of state crimes against an oppressed people which can only fuel anti-Semitism rather than combat it.

The text of Churchill’s “Seven Jewish Children” can be read here:

<http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2009/02/26/churchill.pdf>

A performance can be seen here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2009/apr/25/seven-jewish-children-caryl-churchill>



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