

# Australian media witch hunts Sydney Theatre Company actors over Gaza protest

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1 December 2023

Australia's corporate media, working in conjunction with pro-Israeli propagandists, last week viciously denounced three Sydney Theatre Company (STC) actors for wearing keffiyeh scarfs during an encore of the company's production of *The Seagull*, Anton Chekhov's classic 19th century drama.

While the actors—Mabel Li, Megan Wilding and Harry Greenwood—did not say anything during the encore, their actions were a defiant statement of solidarity with the Palestinian people and another component of the ongoing global protests against Israel's war crime in the Gaza Strip.

*The Seagull* was adapted by playwright Andrew Upton, the husband of actor Cate Blanchett, both former creative directors of the theatre company. Blanchett was among the first group of internationally-acclaimed actors and musicians to issue an open letter early last month calling for a Gaza ceasefire.

Greenwood, the son of actor Hugo Weaving who is a member of the STC board, later shared an Instagram video of the solidarity gesture. It was also shared by Li who quoted the great Nina Simone, the African-America singer-songwriter and courageous fighter for social justice: "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times."

Greenwood, Li and Wilding previously signed a November 11 open letter condemning the Labor government over its refusal to call for the Israeli government to "withdraw its military from the Gaza Strip, stop the bombing of Gaza and immediately end the blockade that has cut off water, electricity and medicine to Gaza."

The letter also supported calls by the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions for global trade union action to "end all complicity and stop arming Israel." It condemned "the silencing and intimidation that our members experience when expressing support for or reporting on Palestine."

Less than 24 hours after *The Seagull* solidarity action, Australia's corporate media, led by Murdoch-owned publications and its Sky News channel, went into overdrive, demonising the young actors, soliciting denunciations from leading Zionists and other right-wing figures, some of them demanding the actors be sacked, and calling for a formal apology from the STC.

The actors' solidarity gesture, the media and the pro-Israel lobbyists claimed, was an outrageous "political stunt" that

"fuelled antisemitism." The keffiyeh scarf, they declared, was a "symbol of hate" and upsetting for Jewish theatre patrons.

The witch-hunting continued for the rest of the week with a constant stream of crude slander. Two pro-Israeli members of the STC's 11-member Foundational board resigned in protest over the actors' protest. This was followed by statements from wealthy pro-Israeli business chiefs demanding an economic boycott of the theatre company.

Anti-Defamation Commission chair Dr Dvir Abramovich denounced the actors' protest as "an immoral act [that] blows on the embers of discord and fans the flames of anti-Jewish hostility."

Keren Miller, who co-authored a petition calling for a formal apology, told the media, "[O]ur safe space, a theatre that is meant to bring communities together, was instead used as a platform for a political stunt that sought only to divide and alienate."

Pro-Zionist New South Wales Liberal Party senator Dave Sharma ignorantly declared that art and the theatre should not seek to "alienate" but "bring people together."

The theatre is not the place, he asserted, "to deliver these sort of overtly political messages. It's unhelpful and undermines social cohesion."

These reactionary demands effectively call for the banning of all honest commentary on Israel's illegal military bombardment of Gaza and its 75-year brutal dispossession and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

The mountain of lies, disinformation, pro-Israeli military talking points and propaganda to justify the bloody slaughter of an estimated 20,000 Palestinians, half of them children, must be uncritically embraced in the interests of "social cohesion."

STC management has refused to challenge these anti-democratic attacks. Instead, it has bent over backwards to pacify the Zionists and the corporate media.

An STC spokesperson issued a statement on Sunday disavowing the actors' actions and denying any preliminary knowledge of the protest. This was rejected by the right-wing lynch mob who demanded an official apology. The STC slavishly complied, issuing a statement on Wednesday and suddenly cancelling a scheduled evening performance of the

play.

The STC was “deeply sorry,” it said, for any “hurt” caused by the actors’ protest and its immediate response to the issue.

“We support individual freedom of expression but believe that the right to free speech does not supersede our responsibility to create safe workplaces and theatres,” it said, without making a single reference to the mass slaughter in Gaza. The STC provided no explanation of how the wearing of keffiyeh scarfs violated its responsibility to create “safe workplaces.”

The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance issued a bland and perfunctory statement supporting the STC actors’ “right to freedom of opinion and expression” and declaring it would “support all members facing any disciplinary action for simply exercising that right.” It made no call on its members, however, to take any form of action over the corporate media and Zionist witch-hunt against the young actors and in defence of their basic rights.

Scores of angry creative workers and long-time STC patrons have denounced the STC’s “apology,” peppering its Instagram page with comments.

One wrote: “We make political and social commentary on stage every day. You can’t ask actors to be mute and not have opinions when their job is to reflect the world. Proud of these actors and watching the Seagull next week to support them. I wish STC didn’t apologise but applauded instead.”

Another: “I stand with artists who stand for what they believe in and who aren’t afraid to exercise THEIR DEMOCRATIC RIGHT to peacefully protest. Freedom of expression, thought, speech and freedom to protest are vital aspects of a healthy and fully functioning society. For an organisation such as STC (and what they present themselves to be) to take this position, it has demonstrated the true nature of those in positions of influence and power behind the ‘inclusive,’ ‘representative,’ ‘diverse’ guise.”

A third wrote: “The people supporting Palestine are the regular people. The one’s complaining about it are the ones from positions of power. This is what scares me. The powerful and rich are again trying to challenge our freedoms.”

Last night, the STC removed all comments from its Instagram account in another submissive signal to the pro-Israel lobby.

On Thursday it was revealed that Aboriginal actors participating in a joint STC and Moogahlin Performing Arts production of *The Visitors* defiantly spoke out in defence of the Palestinians at the end of all their evening performances in Canberra and Geelong during November.

Their passionate appeal, which can be watched here, is yet another demonstration that thousands of actors and other creative workers are determined to speak out in support of the Palestinians and will not be intimidated by corporate media and Zionist threats. Written by Jane Harrison and directed by Robin Wright, the play is the imagined response of seven Aboriginal clan leaders to the arrival in Sydney of Britain’s First Fleet of

convicts in 1788.

The powerful statement by *The Visitors* actors, which was a collective effort, drew a direct connection between the dispossession of the Palestinians and the brutal dispossession and ongoing oppression of Australia’s indigenous population by British and Australian imperialism.

The three-minute address called on the audience to speak out against the Gaza genocide and sign, and circulate, a petition demanding an immediate ceasefire.

“The cast wanted to come back out as a collective to send our love to those who are being severely oppressed right now, at this very moment. It is truly shocking and from our small corner, we wanted to say that we see you...

“We refuse to look away from the mothers, the fathers, the families and the communities being pulled apart, especially the children.

“We can’t help but see the parallels between our story and theirs, so we stand here and share our grief with the situation in Gaza, because if there’s one thing that we know how to do, and do well, it’s to grieve,” it said.

Elaine Crombie, who helped develop the statement, told the ABC yesterday, “My heart was just breaking at that time and I just was like, we’ve got to do something. We’re doing this play talking about the day before the [British] settlers came, we know what the story is, we know how it’s going to end for the mob.”

Commenting on the STC’s apology to the Zionist lobby, she said. “When I saw the STC had apologised I was like ‘what are you doing?’ I couldn’t understand, I couldn’t wrap my brain around it. Are you sorry that you hired those three actors, those individual thinkers, those activists?... Art is political. I just can’t believe that they would say that.”

We urge actors and all other creative workers determined to fight the misinformation, lies and bullying threats to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and discuss how to take forward this fight.



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**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**