

Australian actors condemn Gaza genocide, oppose Zionist crackdown on free speech

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In Australia as internationally, Israel's genocide against the Palestinians has been accompanied by an onslaught against free speech, with opponents of the war crimes subjected to slander, lies and intimidation by Zionist lobbyists, the corporate media, official institutions and the government. Critical voices in the arts have been a particular target.

There are, however, indications of a growing pushback by principled figures in the creative industry. The brazenness of Israel's mass murder, as well as the crude and increasingly fascistic character of its apologists, are undoubtedly factors. So, too, is a broader popular revulsion and anger.

In comments to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday, Hugo Weaving, one of Australia's most acclaimed actors, warned of a climate of fear, with people "cowed into not speaking out" against Israel's atrocities.

Weaving has been a leading figure in television, film and theatre for more than thirty years. A recipient of six Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards, Weaving is known to an international audience, including through his roles in the *Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings* films.

While pointing to the broader atmosphere that has been cultivated, Weaving specifically referenced the experience of his son, the talented young actor Harry Greenwood. Together with two other cast members, Greenwood donned a Keffiyeh during the curtain call of a Sydney Theatre Company (STC) production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* on November 25.

The wearing of the Palestinian scarves provoked a brutal onslaught against the young actors. As Weaving explained: "That very silent protest, it wasn't even noticed on opening night. Really, it wasn't. I was there. I didn't notice the keffiyeh. It was the fact that it was

attacked the next morning in the national newspaper [the *Australian*] and that those three actors were called junior actors, when two of them were playing two of the lead roles. And they were vilified and called antisemites, and they were asked to resign. That is so deliberately divisive, and it's appalling. The outcry was appalling."

The *Australian* and other corporate outlets presented the wearing of Palestinian scarves as equivalent to a declaration of support for Hamas. High-profile supporters of Israel claimed that the Keffiyehs were "triggering" and had made them feel "unsafe." Two board members of the STC resigned, one accompanying her departure with hysterical comments along those lines.

The campaign was not only absurd, but was also completely racist. Clothing associated with the Palestinians was to be banned, in a kind of cultural erasure accompanying Israel's physical erasure of the people of Gaza. A demand for the blacklisting of an article of clothing associated with any other ethnic or religious grouping would have been denounced as the worst xenophobia, but not in this instance.

Instead, the STC management bent over backwards to appease the witch-hunters and join in the vilification of the actors. Pointing to the climate that was created, Weaving explained that the real reason a November 29 performance of *The Seagull* was canceled was that Greenwood and his co-stars were being hounded by the media.

Weaving noted: "I do think there wasn't enough front-foot commentary back from the STC. I think the problem in our country is we're all cowed into not speaking out. And that's the problem I have. And I thought that was true of the STC. I think it's true up to the highest echelons of power in our country and in the

US.”

Weaving has been in Ireland over recent months, acting in a play titled *The President*. “It’s interesting being in Ireland; they’re much more vocal, much more sane talking about Gaza and Palestine, much more level-headed,” he said. “It’s great to hear so many incredibly intelligent Jewish artists, lawyers, getting up and talking about the various things that Harry was trying to highlight, very quietly.”

The STC responded to Weaving’s comments with a statement to the *Herald* that only served to underscore everything he had said. It confirmed that whatever has happened at the STC since late November has not included the growth of a backbone, or the development of any commitment to artistic freedom.

“We acknowledge there are things we could have done better,” STC chair Ann Johnson wrote. “We know some of our donors felt we didn’t do enough, and we know some of our artists felt we didn’t do enough. We continue to listen and learn and are committed to finding a positive way forward.”

The equal billing given to the “feelings” of donors and the rights of artists sums up much that is wrong with the arts. If the theater is beholden to the whims and “feelings” of the ultra-wealthy, who throw some of their spare change at the stage, genuine artistic freedom is a dead letter. In this instance, the offended feelings were over an item of clothing, which the captains of industry decided was an unacceptable protest against the genocide that they support.

The STC’s journey of “listening and learning” has not taken it very far, with the statement declaring that the institution “does not support individual political statements being made in curtain calls.”

Based on the context, those “individual political statements” presumably include the wearing of Palestinian scarves. It is hardly hyperbole to ask, what is next? Will Palestinian and other Middle Eastern actors be banned from the stage, lest their presence hurt the feelings of the donors?

The STC furore, though an extreme example, formed part of a broader campaign, all of which is premised on the false conflation of the militarist Israeli state with the Jewish people.

That lie is also receiving a welcome pushback.

In the latest example, 83-year-old British-Australian actress Miriam Margolyes delivered an impassioned

condemnation of Israel’s war crimes.

In a social media video, Margolyes, who is Jewish, said: “I have never been so ashamed of Israel as I am at this moment. To me it seems as if Hitler has won. He’s changed us Jews from being compassionate and caring and do unto others as you would have them do unto you, into this vicious, genocidal, nationalist nation, pursuing and killing women and children.”

Margolyes declared: “In the name of humanity, I call upon all Jews to shout, beg, scream for a ceasefire. It is not antisemitic to have a different opinion of the wartime actions now. We have to do as my mother used to say the right thing. The right thing is a ceasefire to stop the killing.”

The video has reached 2.4 million people on X/Twitter, where it has been liked more than 20,000 times. It was put out by the Jewish Council of Australia, formed earlier this year, to provide the growing numbers of Jewish people opposed to the Israeli war crimes with representation.



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