

German politicians, theatre management denounce actor Shehab Fatoum for calling for peace in Gaza

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On May 15 the artistic director of Theater Aachen, Elena Tzavara, hosted a gala celebrating the theatre's 200th anniversary. The event was well attended by theatre devotees, sponsors and personalities from culture and politics. As part of the festivities, the entire ensemble, the company's, singers, opera choir, and symphony orchestra addressed themes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, performed in numerous variations. At one point in the proceedings, however, a scandal erupted.

Syrian-born actor Shehab Fatoum deviated from the script. He was supposed to recite what is known as "Bottom's Dream," a famed passage from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream—past the wit of man to say what dream it was ..."). Lying under a bench, he was intended to comment on one of the lovers from *Romeo and Juliet* using Bottom's words. Instead, Fatoum stepped up on stage and recited his own "dream," a dream of peace in the Middle East. He delivered a moving speech against the genocide in Gaza, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s celebrated August 1963 appeal for equality and an end to racism.

Only the first sentence referred to the mechanic Bottom's fantastical revelation or King's vision of racial equality, the rest was Fatoum's own reverie:

I have a dream; it's beyond comprehension to say what kind of dream it was.

I had a dream that the war in Gaza was over and a peace prevailed in the Middle East that was real and fair for all.

I had a dream that Germany played a beautiful

and positive role in bringing peace.

I had a dream that all of you were wonderful in my beautiful dream. You all made a difference, changing your perspective, instead of ignoring it, instead of sending weapons to the Middle East. You didn't ignore how people die, people who have hearts, livers, intestines, and beautiful dreams like you.

I had a dream where it was impossible to attack and shoot aid ships in the Mediterranean, in international waters, without permission, just because they were sending aid and food to Gaza. I had a dream that we were all equal. I had a dream that there was no racism.

In a statement to the *Aachener Zeitung* [daily newspaper], the actor emphasized that he had experienced firsthand what war meant and felt a responsibility to speak out: "At a gala where many influential people were present, I wanted to give peace a voice." That was his responsibility as an artist and not just a theatrical gesture. The reaction of the audience was by no means negative, said Fatoum, who is leaving the ensemble at his own request at the end of this season.

Fatoum's elementary but moving form of protest, however, led to strong reactions. While there was some approval for Fatoum's speech from the audience and from fellow actors, it sparked a storm of outrage from local and state politicians, as well as theatre management.

After the gala, the local mayor Sibylle Keupen (Green Party) discussed the incident with the audience, which

included “outraged Jewish citizens,” asserting: “I deeply regret that the atmospheric celebration, marked by great commitment and enthusiasm, was marred by these inappropriate remarks.”

The statement from North Rhine-Westphalia Minister of Culture Ina Brandes (CDU) was particularly vicious. In a social media post, she accused Fatoum of “one-sided pro-Palestinian propaganda” and continued: “Antisemitism and hatred of Israel have no place in our society—not in culture, not in academia, nowhere.”

Brandes thus joined the chorus of politicians and media outlets screaming “antisemitism” and demonizing every statement, no matter how peaceful and humanitarian, against the brutal genocide in Palestine. This is despite the fact that the Israeli government has officially declared the expulsion of all Palestinians to be its official policy, in violation of international law. These politicians are abusing the memory of the Holocaust to support the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Netanyahu’s right-wing, Zionist regime and justify the German government’s arms deliveries to Israel.

The theatre’s artistic director Tzavara initially expressed herself “extremely surprised,” but then the theatre management explicitly distanced itself “from this form of misuse of the stage.” Tzavara declared the evening had been instrumentalized for a “one-sided political message.”

The accusation was repeatedly made that Fatoum’s intervention in the program “for a personal expression of opinion” was highly inappropriate, especially since he had omitted the Hamas massacre from his text.

Chief dramaturge Kerstin Grübmer reacted particularly strongly. She was “angry” and shocked, “especially because it is highly unprofessional to offend everyone on stage like that.” What sort of theatre is Grübmer used to? None of any use, that’s certain.

In any case, as though “to offend” were the goal of Fatoum’s appeal for peace! Moreover, it is doubtful that all of Fatoum’s colleagues felt this way, because at the subsequent celebration in the theatre’s mirror foyer, Fatoum was reportedly hugged by several colleagues, and probably not just because he was leaving the ensemble.

In reality, Fatoum’s appeal for peace and humanity had nothing in common with an unprofessional

provocation. Rather, it was in keeping with the best traditions of theatre since antiquity. He recognized the responsibility of art and artists to stand up for peace and humanity. His aim was to make the theatre not only a place of play and entertainment, but also one for actively addressing the problems and ills of society and denouncing those in power. His appeal was therefore by no means uncollegial, but rather in the interest of theatrical art and thus also of his colleagues.

The dramaturge and the theatre management should recall the clear message from another of Shakespeare’s plays: In Act 3, Scene 2, Hamlet explains that the purpose of acting, from its very beginnings, “was and is, to hold up a mirror to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time its form and pressure.”

The urgency of aggressively defending the theatre’s role as a critical force in society becomes clear when one considers the cultural policy of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The party’s policy is directly influencing the present German government, primarily through the newly appointed ultra-right head of culture, Wolfram Weimer. The AfD, which demonizes social criticism in theatre, embraces “German mainstream culture instead of multiculturalism” (see Hitler’s “degenerate art”), and advocates tradition, folklore and national pride.

In its most recent motion in the *Bundestag*, the AfD described its policy as the “defence of German identity.” It calls on the German government to replace “the current reduction of cultural identity to a culture of guilt and shame” with positive reference to points of cultural identity, “in order to bring the active appropriation of cultural traditions and identity-forming values ??to the foreground.” It calls for Goethe and Schiller to be read in schools, thereby degrading these classic authors to harmless idols, even though both men were leading advocates of the enlightenment and internationalism and dedicated enemies of chauvinism and backwardness.



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