

Toronto Film Critics Association near collapse over censorship of pro-Palestinian speech

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The decision to censor a pro-Palestinian comment in the awards acceptance speech of Canadian actor and director Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers has plunged the Toronto Film Critics Association (TFCA) into a crisis which threatens to collapse the organization.

Tailfeathers, an award-winning First Nations actor and director, could not attend the Association's 2026 Gala to receive the award for best supporting performance in a Canadian film for her role in the drama *Sweet Angel Baby*. Tailfeathers recorded a video acceptance speech, following instructions provided to her by the organization.

Her short video included the following statement:

When we were shooting *Sweet Angel Baby*, October 7th [2023] happened and it changed everything. I just want to say that my heart continues to be with the people of Palestine who are experiencing this ongoing genocide and thank you to anyone in this industry who's been brave enough to say anything.

These brief but politically significant remarks, 51 words taking 20 seconds to recite, were cut from the video recording of the awards ceremony.

The actor responded to this blatant act of political censorship in a principled, public letter, reproduced by the *Hollywood Reporter* and other media outlets.

"Regretfully, I am writing to inform you that I will be returning the award due to the TFCA leadership's choice to censor my words on Palestine. I was unable to attend the gala in Toronto so I sent in an acceptance speech by video." Tailfeathers then re-stated the censored portion of her speech.

She continued,

"I believe it is fair to directly quote Johanna Schneller's email as she is your president and is speaking on your behalf, so here is what she said regarding the censorship of my words:

'The simple answer is, we edited your video for length (for what it's worth, we edited other people's as well). All

the videos were approximately one minute long. We pulled from your video what we considered to be the most important, most representative minute, which was you talking about how rare your role in the film was in cinema, and thanking your director. We thought that was truest to the spirit of your acceptance, and to the show in general...'"

"But the production team and I of course did have a long conversation first; we did not make the cuts lightly. We honestly were not trying to censor your political views. Personally, I happen to support them..."

To this one can only say—save us from such “supporters,” who succeed only in doing what they claim not to intend! According to management, censoring Tailfeathers' political speech was an accident about which the production team “had a long discussion” before committing it! What a fraud!

Nobody of any artistic or political integrity believes Schneller's words, apparently not even Schneller herself, who has resigned from her position along with 16 other members of the 46-member organization in the aftermath. The manifestly unprincipled censorship, and Tailfeathers' principled response, have put the organization on life support.

As any film-school sophomore knows, the editorial decision—what to cut, what to include, is a form of speech in and of itself. The decision to delete a statement which is not only a declaration of moral sympathy for suffering Palestinians, but which implies a defense of the Palestinians' right to armed resistance against Israel's genocide, cannot be believably ascribed to a simple desire for “brevity” or a time budget. Not in today's political climate. It is an act of political censorship, a cowardly, opportunistic political adaptation to a growing social climate of extreme reaction, which demands that all opponents of the use of genocide as a tool of imperialist statecraft remain silent, so that genocide may continue and go unpunished.

With the launch of the USA and Israel's unprovoked war of imperialist aggression against Iran and Lebanon, the genocide is *expanding*.

Tailfeathers called it such, declaring that “Neutrality is a form of violence; the choice to be apolitical is political.” She described the

effect of the mounting climate of reaction on her own artistic career.

I am also aware of backdoor conversations had by people in positions of power in this industry concerning my views on Palestine, which has likely impacted my career and livelihood. People talk and this industry is small. I refuse to be silenced and I refuse to stand on the wrong side of history in order to placate people who abuse their positions of power.

These “conversations” have emerged from the backrooms. They are being pronounced from the podium of cultural institutions as policy, aligning the world of official “culture” with the world of official politics, which is now ankle deep in blood and mud, and preparing to bathe in it up to its neck.

During a panel discussion at the Berlin Film Festival in February, the live feed of the event was cut as soon as a journalist asked,

The Berlinale as an institution has famously shown solidarity with people in Iran and Ukraine, but never with Palestine, even today. In light of the German government’s support of the genocide in Gaza and its role as the main funder of the Berlinale, do you as a member of the jury...?

As if to put a period on the discussion, the panel chair, internationally renowned director Wim Wenders responded, “We have to stay out of politics because if we make movies that are dedicatedly political, we enter the field of politics; but we are the counterweight to politics.”

Wenders’ scandalous comments, and the censorship of Tailfeathers defense of the Palestinians expose the extent to which official culture serves not as a “counterweight to politics” but as one of its critical supporting pillars, reinforcing ruling class ideology and world imperialism. This is the only role which will henceforth be permitted.

If the Berlin Film Festival has “shown solidarity with people in Iran and in Ukraine” it has been largely to justify imperialist wars of aggression against both Iran and Russia under the phony pretense that such crimes are in fact carried out in defense of “human rights.” If the struggle of the Palestinians is anathema to people like Wenders and the committee formerly running the Toronto Film Critics Association, it is because they understand very well that their own careers are *on the line* if they should step *out of line*.

Across the sphere of bourgeois culture, enormous pressure is being brought to bear by capitalist states and powerful Zionist lobby groups to enact a policy of “*Gleichschaltung*”—the alignment of official culture with the criminal policies of imperialism, to justify, excuse or bury them.

Tailfeathers’ principled refusal to submit to this policy has

engendered a response from some Toronto film critics. But the quality of some of the responses also exposes the debilitating effect of ruling class ideology upon official culture as much as the censorious act itself.

Radheyan Simonpillai, a film critic for CTV’s *Your Morning* and a pop culture columnist for CBC Radio, notably framed his resignation letter from the TFCA not in terms of defending the Palestinians, but in the officially accepted language of identity politics, stating

I can’t in good faith participate in an organization that kicked off the awards ceremony with a land acknowledgement, and then proceeded to minimize the sole acceptance speech delivered by an Indigenous artist.

But Tailfeathers was not censored because she is indigenous, but because of her defense of the Palestinians! But that fact dares not pass his lips. No doubt even a sympathetic comment about the Palestinians would put Simonpillai’s own employment with CTV and CBC at risk.

Tailfeathers’ artistic concerns draw on her own experience as an indigenous person, but these experiences also have a wider appeal to the working class as a whole, who have endured similar experiences. She is known for co-directing the 2019 film *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, which won the TFCA prize for Best Canadian Film and the 2020 Canadian Screen Award for Best Director. The film deals with a chance encounter between two women, one a victim of domestic abuse. Tailfeathers also plays Áila, who shelters and encourages the abused character Rosie to seek help to escape her abuser. The film was featured in the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival.

Her concern with these issues, and her principled defense of the struggle of the Palestinians against the overwhelming barbarism of Israel and its imperialist sponsors constitute a hopeful sign.



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