

BRICUP Newsletter 52

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BRICUP

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Universities of Palestine

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Israel is not immune to boycott

If an artistic institution connives in injustice, it must be permissible to call it to account without being labelled a Nazi, even if it is Jewish.

An unexplored question to emerge from the furor over the prospect of Israel's National Theatre, Habima, coming to Shakespeare's Globe theatre later this month, is why liberal thinkers who want to see Palestinians achieve their rights are so reluctant to hold Israel to account for denying them.

Playwright David Edgar, for example, in a [Comment piece for the Guardian](#), elegantly deflected the Nazi and McCarthyite epithets hurled at Mark Rylance, Emma Thompson, Jonathan Miller and other actors, directors and writers opposed to the involvement of Habima in the Cultural Olympiad. But he fell into the trap of what he himself termed "easy conflations" by allowing Habima's "Jewishness" to determine his attitude towards boycotting it.

Miller and co put their names to a letter arguing that Habima, scheduled to perform *The Merchant of Venice* in Hebrew at Shakespeare's Globe on May 28 and 29, was not fit to participate because it is a state-funded body that plays for Israeli colonists in illegal settlements in the Palestinian West Bank. For the text of that letter see the April edition of this Newsletter.

As Edgar showed, signing the letter was a legitimate non-state, non-violent action akin to latter day anti-apartheid sporting and cultural boycotts. The case against the Bahrain grand prix, endorsed by British Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, is founded on the same principles – refusing to lend legitimacy to a state perpetrating human rights abuses.

If this applies to Boers and Bahrainis, why not Israelis? Because, said Edgar, "Habima is not just an Israeli but a Jewish theatre."

This is to succumb to the "easy conflations" so often uttered by Israel's supporters – that the state represents all Jews and an attack on it is by definition antisemitic. These are conflations many Jews disavow. Human rights abuses do not become excusable because committed by Jews. The very

idea smacks of a kind of twisted, reverse antisemitism.

If the arguments for boycott apply to the facts of the case, they apply irrespective of the faith or ethnicity of the parties involved. Habima's role as an Israeli state cultural ambassador is beyond doubt. We have this on good authority from the company's artistic director Ilan Ronen who says in one breath it is "completely independent, artistically and politically" but in another it "has no choice" but to perform in the settlements.

"Like other theatre companies and dance companies in Israel," [he told the Observer](#), "we are state-financed, and financially supported to perform all over the country. This is the law."

So, in exchange for a state subsidy, Habima ignores the fact that the "hall of culture" in the settlement of Ariel is not actually in "the country" of Israel, but on stolen Palestinian land, and goes to entertain the colonial settlers planted there in contravention of Fourth Geneva Convention. The Jewish Chronicle weekly newspaper has [announced](#) that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which launched its Brand Israel campaign in 2005 explicitly linking "propaganda and culture", is covering a £10,000 shortfall in Habima's budget for its London trip.

There could not be a clearer instance of culture in the service of politics.

If mainstream Jewish organisations enthusiastically embrace Israel's cultural ambassadors, and claim that to challenge them is to offend all Jews, we are not obliged to agree. A growing number of Jews take an opposite view. Some were among the signatories of the original letter calling on the Globe to rescind Habima's invitation. Some are leading members of the boycott campaign which, far from pillorying actors because they are Jews or Hebrew speakers, has urged the Globe to replace Habima with Hebrew-speaking artists who are not in hock to the Israeli state.

Habima has [tried to claim](#) that by inviting both them and West Bank theatre company Ashtar, which is performing Richard II in Arabic on May 4 and 5 (see the report in this Newsletter) the Globe's festival would somehow "help with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." As if having Israelis and Palestinians on

the same stage, four weeks apart, can do anything to resolve the confiscation of Palestinian land, the fate of their refugees, the siege on Gaza, or the occupation of the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Ashtar's artistic director Iman Aoun wrote to Globe counterpart Dominic Dromgoole rejecting the idea out of hand: "They have insinuated cooperation with us to undermine the growing cultural boycott of complicit Israeli institutions," Aoun said.

When Palestinians and Jewish Israelis both enjoy equality and justice, then let's talk about artistic collaboration.

By Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, coordinator of the cultural working group of the Boycott Israel Network in the UK and a founding member of Jews for Boycotting Israeli Goods. This article was first published by OpenDemocracy to whom due credit is hereby given. See <http://www.opendemocracy.net/naomi-wimborne-idrissi/israel-is-not-immune-to-boycott>

Ashtar at the Globe Theatre, May 4th 2012 A report by Jews4BIG on the triumphant Palestinian Richard II at Shakespeare's Globe

"London loved the Palestinian Theatre's performance of Richard II in Arabic at the Globe World Shakespeare Festival on 4th May 2012 – a wonderful play beautifully performed." So commented one audience member who joined a packed and lively post-performance discussion on Friday evening with more than a dozen members of the ASHTAR theatre company and British theatre professionals and enthusiasts. Also on the panel were UK writer and broadcaster [Bidisha](#) and Sonja Linden, founder of [iceandfire theatre](#).

Based in Ramallah in the Occupied West Bank, Ashtar was formed in 1991 by two prominent Palestinian actors and directors, Iman Aoun and Edward Muallem, both of whom were on stage in Richard II at the Globe on May 4 and 5. Their Gaza Monologues, created in 2010 and performed by more than 60 companies in 36 countries, was their artistic response to the Israeli assault on Gaza which killed almost 1,400 Palestinians in Dec/Jan 2008/09.

It told the personal stories of a group of children from Gaza. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to stop its performance in Norway.

At the beginning of Friday's discussion, Aoun, Muallem and eleven other cast members introduced themselves, each drawing warm applause from the audience as they revealed the richness and complexity of their lives as Palestinian artists living and working all over Palestine and the diaspora. Many are established figures in Palestinian society as directors, playwrights, film-makers, theatre group founders and artistic directors, and educators. Ashtar's artistic director Aoun said that in interpreting a Shakespeare play outside their usual repertoire, they had to work hard to understand the setting for Richard II, to explore its meaning at the human level, and to consider what it meant to them.. "With help from our Irish director Connall Morrison we eventually made our starting point the end of the play, where Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV of England) says he will go to Jerusalem to clean his hands of the blood he had shed – and to dirty our land!" said Aoun. "Britain occupied Ireland as it later occupied Palestine. But the play speaks far beyond our situation. Shakespeare talks about every tyrant, every power struggle in every place and time."

At the Globe's reception for Ashtar, after their second performance of Richard II on Saturday May 5, Globe artistic director Dominic Dromgoole hailed Ashtar's interpretation of a play which the English habitually did not "get". "It took a Palestinian company to show us what it's really about," he said. The discussion on Friday, held in a lecture theatre at the Globe but organised independently by Ashtar with help from London-based campaigners for Palestinian rights, repeatedly highlighted Ashtar's role as artists performing universal work. "When Palestinian artists perform, they are not only representing their lives under military occupation," said Bidisha, noting that resistance may take political, diplomatic or cultural forms. She said the play's bloody action gave us claustrophobic character studies reminiscent of a rich Saudi family scheming and fighting for wealth and power. Linden, whose own work explores stories that are often passed over or ignored, said artists have a duty to engage and bear witness. She called theatre "a form of non-violent resistance."

The audience included a number of actors, directors and playwrights who had signed a [letter](#) calling on the Globe to [rescind its invitation](#) to the Israeli

National Theatre, Habima, in the Shakespeare festival. The Habima issue was one of those raised in audience questions. Aoun stated unequivocally that all the theatre companies represented by Ashtar's members support the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS), and specifically cultural boycott. "We cannot agree to any hostile presence on the West Bank, or engage with anyone complicit in it," she said. "Remember we have to LIVE the Occupation. Even coming here, to perform at the Globe, I was strip searched at Tel Aviv airport."

Nicola Zreineh, who played Richard II's depositor Bolingbroke in the play, said the boycott was not just about Habima. "Any institution of the Israeli state should be cut off as long as justice is denied," he said. George Ibrahim, sharing the platform with Aoun and Zreineh, reminded the audience; "We Palestinians are all besieged. Even in Jerusalem the cruel, ugly wall separates us." Another Ashtar member, Firas Farah, joked that checkpoints and closures made it easier to get from Jerusalem to London than to Ramallah.. "When Henry Bolingbroke says he is going to Jerusalem, I think – 'How will he get a permit?'" said Farah.

In an interview with journalist Eleanor Kilroy before coming to London, Aoun addressed the idea that cultural boycott prevents communication between artists on different sides of a conflict. She agreed that art can build bridges and bring people together, but she appealed for "a bit of sanity." "At night Israeli artists want to perform with us and in the morning they serve in the army. What is the use of going on producing art when deep down they know they are breaking basic human rights by supporting the occupation and its apartheid regime and settlements? Israelis need to work inside their own society; changes have to occur on the ground in Israel for there to be real justice."

Go to [Jews4big](#) for the full report with photographs..

Posted on May 6th 2012

The PACBI Column

Respecting BDS Guidelines: Self Determination and International Solidarity

In the Palestinian Campaign for Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), we often face

criticism from people who wish to stand in solidarity with Palestinians without respecting the boycott guidelines set by Palestinian civil society. Setting guidelines, the argument goes, is too restrictive and rigid, alienating the liberal mainstream from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The alternative proposed by some is to let everyone decide how he or she wants to implement BDS, thus allowing for maximum flexibility and growth for the movement. We are specifically criticized for insisting that internationals and Israelis who wish to support our struggle against Israel's apartheid and colonial oppression must take their lead from the oppressed—in this case, the Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC), of which PACBI is a small but critical part.

The issue of double standards arises in some cases when one considers how academics, cultural figures and others had no qualms during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa to take their lead from the anti-apartheid leadership in that country, whereas now, they are calling into question whether Palestinians should set boycott principles or not.

Consistency aside, we wish to offer the rationale for our position, as we maintain that we should be consulted in the process of planning events that involve Israeli institutions in whole or in part, especially when such events fall within gray areas of the BDS guidelines. The insistence of Palestinians to set and interpret the guidelines may lead to misunderstanding, but it is an important, yet sensitive, element of building a social movement in solidarity with Palestinians. This insistence is related to the importance of self-determination and empowering a disempowered, colonized community. It is the oppressed who can best decide what they need from others in the struggle for self-determination, and for others to then decide to what degree, if at all, they are capable and willing of heeding the call of the oppressed.

BDS as Social Movement

The BDS movement is a global social movement that is meant to bring international civil society together to operate as a collective anchored in international law and universal principles of human rights, and to struggle together for common ends, using common, ethically-consistent means. The movement is not a mass of people operating individually and hoping somehow for collective gains. As such, the BNC believes it is imperative that we have a set of shared principles and guidelines. Otherwise, individuals would think of interpreting what the boycott should and should not encompass on their own terms, particularly when

faced with situations that do not immediately appear to be covered by the general boycott criteria and conform to the logic of the boycott. And while this is certainly fine (we are, after all, individuals free to act as we like), we might as well, then, disband the movement and return to doing our morally good but individual--thus largely unsustainable--work. One could think of this as the pre-2004 phase when there were independent voices calling for boycott but no structure to the movement, and no common guidelines adopted by the clear majority in Palestinian civil society.

The Need for Guidelines

The need for guidelines and structure can lead people to question the authority that sets and interprets these guidelines. While we might be skeptical and critical of forms of authority and structure in the abstract, it is important to understand that those in themselves are not the problem. The issue is with the type of authority and structure we attach ourselves to, especially under conditions of colonialism and apartheid. It is, therefore, important to differentiate between types of authority.

For example, PACBI does not seek to “control” people's lives with respect to the boycott. The campaign does ask, however, to build a movement from within the ranks of the oppressed (being mindful, of course, that not all oppressed care to resist nor are they all underprivileged or lacking in power). The mere fact of building a movement implicitly calls for a measure of self-empowerment in order to resist the oppressive and far more powerful regime; otherwise, what is a movement or the advantages of building one? In doing so, we insist on the importance of engaging in constructive, democratic and inclusive internal discussions within the movement to ensure the guidelines remain updated, comprehensive, ethical, and as representative as possible of the great majority in Palestinian society. Another goal is to ensure strong, equal and mutually respectful relations with our partners around the globe.

The long historical relationship that we see time and again between oppressors and oppressed leads us to be cautious of a seemingly recurrent urge by some international and Israeli activists to determine the direction of the movement and its guidelines. Irrespective of intentions, such attempts to ignore the Palestinian reference means that PACBI and the BNC in general have to constantly assert themselves as the reference lest the Palestinians lose stewardship and end up deferring to internationals or Israelis for their modes of resistance, as was the case in the futile years of Oslo.

Respecting the boycott guidelines set by the great majority of Palestinians should not engender a feeling of power imbalance; this would be confusing moral duty with subservience. As a comparison, whites and internationals who respected the black-set boycott guidelines in South Africa were not subservient to blacks, but rather, they were able to see that their moral duty necessitated shedding their privilege and following the lead of the oppressed, eventually becoming part of their struggle. In the Palestinian case, it is our contention that any attempt to circumvent the BDS movement's boycott guidelines, with PACBI and the BNC being its main references, or to expropriate these references to advance any agenda, personal or not, by definition crosses our moral picket line and undermines our peaceful resistance that is adopted by the majority of Palestinian civil society. There is nothing subservient in accepting this.

Building a Movement Together

The activists involved in BDS are building a movement; it is this that we hope people can subscribe to, with all its problems and growing pains it entails. It is important that people understand that it is not their independent or critical thinking that PACBI wants to interfere with; in fact, we very much value this type of thinking and consider it necessary in building a global movement that respects diversity and inclusiveness. We just ask event organizers and those thinking of traveling to Israel, to work with us when it comes to decision-making so that we do not end up working against each other in the name of the same goals. When a lecture or event falls within a gray area, when people are unsure, we are more than happy to offer our advice upon carefully scrutinizing the particularities of each case. When our interpretations collide, then we urge constructive engagement, but we also ask that the Palestinian reference be deferred to in the meantime, lest the Palestinian voice be, once again, sidelined.

Universities rebranding Israel's image: Sussex students and UCU take up the 'hasbara' challenge.

On May 2nd the Sussex Friends of Palestine Society held a meeting to discuss the threat to academic integrity that arises from the new 'Yossi Harel Chair' in Modern Israel Studies, which has just been created at Sussex University. This is the latest in a

series of Zionist funded academic posts being created in UK universities. Israel's supporters, recognising the need to re-brand Israel's image abroad and to oppose the growing international BDS movement, particularly on university campuses, have instituted an intense and generously funded campaign of *hasbara* (literally meaning 'explanation'). This includes the institution of a number of 'Modern Israel Studies' appointments in prominent UK universities, such as the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the Universities of Manchester, Leeds and Oxford.

Essentially, *hasbara* is a euphemism for propaganda. Its objective is to promote the Zionist version of history, and to deflect attention away from Israel's racist policies and its illegal Occupation of Palestine by promoting Israel as a centre of academic and cultural excellence, and as a model of a civilized western democracy.

The Sussex meeting was well attended and attracted staff and UCU members as well as a good turnout of students. It was addressed by BRICUP Committee member, Tom Hickey and by Sussex post-graduate student, Adriano Méralo. Adriano has compiled a comprehensive dossier of the Zionist connections of the financial sponsors of each of these chairs, demonstrating the underlying political agendas behind their creation. It was also reported that Sussex UCU has written to the Sussex Vice Chancellor emphasising the need for the new post to contribute to 'the pursuit of balanced, transparent, critical and independent enquiry issue' and asking searching questions relating to the academic integrity of the procedures being used in making the appointment,

It was unanimously agreed that the current state of teaching on the Middle East in Britain is flawed in that it is heavily focused on the interests of Israel and interprets regional events only in relation to Israeli, US and other Western foreign policy interests. However, a proposal by some present for a campaign to create a corresponding post in Palestine studies was seen by others as objectionable in that it would create a specious sense of 'balance'.

The Palestine Society is now planning a major campaign to oppose this attempt to introduce *hasbara* in to academic life on the Sussex campus, a campaign which will reach out to the Brighton community as a whole. BRICUP meanwhile is in the process of preparing a detailed briefing document on the background to this *hasbara* campaign, on its threat to academic integrity and freedom, together with guidance on opposition

strategies that can be followed on campuses nationwide. The whole issue will therefore be returned to in more detail in future issues of this newsletter.

Monica Wusteman.

The Jerusalem Quartet at the Brighton festival

The Jerusalem String Quartet's recital at the Brighton Festival on May 8th was interrupted by protesters objecting to Israel's apartheid system, its illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, its attacks on civilians in Gaza and its suppression of Palestinian human rights in Israel and the Occupied territories.

The action was taken in line with the [call from Palestinian civil society for a boycott of state-supported cultural events](#). Art and culture have become an important weapon in the Israeli government's public relations campaign, and in 2006, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an initiative called "Brand Israel," to salvage Israel's deteriorating image abroad. Arye Mekel of Israel's Foreign Ministry has stated that, "We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theater companies, exhibits... This way you show Israel's prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war."

The home base of the Jerusalem String Quartet, the Jerusalem Music Centre[1], is prominently featured on the Foreign Ministry website and boasts that it collaborates with several Israeli government ministries,[2]clearly placing the quartet and the other participating cultural institutions in the orbit of the campaign to "re-brand" Israel's image in the West. Thus, Israel is portrayed as an enlightened centre of arts and technology, thereby concealing the ugly facts about its occupation, racial discrimination and grave violations of international law and fundamental Palestinian rights.

The America-Israel Cultural Foundation, a main funder of the Jerusalem String Quartet, has taken as its mission the support of musicians and artists in order to put a different spin on the Israeli apartheid regime." AICF plays a vital role in Israeli culture. We are the primary source of funding for young artists. These artists show the world a side of Israel

many never experience." [3] All four of the quartet members received scholarships from the foundation; and the instruments used by three of them are on loan from the AICF. Through its patronage of young artists like these, the AICF advances its agenda. In turn, by its close ties with and promotion of the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, the young artists of the Jerusalem String Quartet become part of the Israel re-branding campaign and are complicit in the attempt to obscure Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights.

A spokesperson for the protesters said, 'These musicians are cultural ambassadors for an apartheid state and as such should not be performing at the Brighton Festival .The Festival Guest Director's mission statement affirms that the role of the festival is to 'remind us of .. the positive changes we can all make to improve our world for future generations.' Using music to whitewash the apartheid state of Israel should have no place here.'

[Photographs and videos of the disruption](#)

Notes.

[1] The Quartet notes on its website that its home base is the Jerusalem Music Center:
<http://www.jerusalemstringquartet.com/artist.php?view=links>

[2] See <http://www.jmc.co.il/thejmc.asp?cid=2>

[3] See <http://www.aicf.org/>

Financial support for BRICUP

BRICUP needs your financial support.

Arranging meetings and lobbying activities are expensive. We need funds to support visiting speakers, book rooms for public meetings, print leaflets and pay the whole range of expenses that a busy campaign demands.

Please do consider making a donation .

One-off donations may be made by sending a cheque to the Treasurer, at BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London, WC1N 3XX, UK or by making a bank transfer to BRICUP at

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BRICUP is the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine.

We are always willing to help provide speakers for meetings. All such requests and any comments or suggestions concerning this Newsletter are welcome.

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