

# Pushback against Zionist witch-hunt of Sydney Theatre Company performers

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A hysterical campaign against three Sydney Theatre Company (STC) actors who wore Keffiyehs during a curtain call on November 25 has encountered opposition including from within the artistic fraternity.

The actors—Mabel Li, Megan Wilding and Harry Greenwood—did not say anything, as they wore the Keffiyehs while receiving an ovation for their performance of Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. They had previously signed open letters, condemning the bombardment of Gaza, and have posted on social media to express their solidarity with the besieged Palestinians.

The donning of the Keffiyehs was rapidly seized upon by the Murdoch media, Zionist lobby groups and even establishment politicians, who presented it as an outrage, bordering on a hate crime. Two STC board members resigned, the theatre company issued multiple public apologies and cancelled another performance of *The Seagull* last Wednesday on the ludicrous grounds of ensuring the “safety” of those who were to attend.

The craven actions of STC management notwithstanding, there is a sense that the proponents of Israel may have overextended themselves. By launching a venomous witch-hunt against talented young actors, whose only “crime” was to wear Arabic scarves, they inadvertently pointed to the entirely fraudulent attempts to delegitimise all opposition to the genocide and to equate criticism of the Israeli regime with antisemitism.

On social media, many have noted the essentially racist character of the campaign against the actors. In no other context would it be considered acceptable to demand a ban on an article of clothing, or to attack those who wear it, because it is associated with a particular ethnic group or nationality.

Indicating the growing opposition, Louise Adler, a

book publisher and director of the Adelaide Writers’ Week, strongly condemned the witch-hunt and defended the actors in a Monday night interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7:30” program. The interview was all the more striking, given that “7:30” and all the public broadcaster’s news and current affairs programs have aggressively promoted Israel Defence Forces talking points over the past two months.

Adler stated that it “seemed to me that STC management wasn’t taking great care over supporting their actors and that they seemed to be more concerned with pacifying donors.” She added: “The attention seemed to be on donors taking their cheque books and walking away and I think arts organisations need to have some clarity about the moral compromises they’re prepared to make when they take donors’ support.”

The interviewer, Laura Tingle, asked: “Is it reasonable nonetheless to say, well the audience is taking offence and we have to take that seriously?”

Adler, bluntly, responded: “So the question is why would the audience take offence?” The three actors had indicated “at their curtain call that we stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people and what is going on under occupation at this point in time. And for donors, in the main, captains of industry with the capacity to support the arts, to feel threatened by that declaration in the comfort of an air-conditioned theatre seems to be remarkable and disturbing.”

Tingle asked whether actors and artists should bring their political views to the theatre.

Adler insisted that this had occurred throughout the history of art. She recalled great anti-war artworks, including Picasso’s *Guernica*, depicting the horror of fascist bombardment during the Spanish civil war. This was part of a “long and honourable and important

tradition of artists being engaged in the world they inhabit.” Adler commented that “art that is not made of this world, that doesn’t take into account this world, feels to me rather vacuous.”

Tingle noted that many of the complaints about the wearing of the Keffiyehs had emanated from “the Jewish community,” and patrons of that background who said they were made “uncomfortable” by the scarves.

Adler responded by noting that this was part of a “long and assiduous campaign by those who support Israel and its government, successive governments and policies to suggest that any criticism of Israel is intolerable and inappropriate.” The continuous “conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism,” she warned, was aimed at making it “impossible to be a critic of Israel and its occupation.”

Adler, who happens to be Jewish, recounted her own experiences. When in the early 2000s she wrote a review of the memoirs of Edward Said, the well-known Palestinian author, Israel’s then ambassador to Australia had demanded a private meeting with her to warn against airing “Israel’s dirty linen in public.”

Adler had later published a book by Antony Lowenstein, a Jewish author and sharp critic of Israel, on the influence of the Zionist lobby. A campaign had been mounted, Adler said, extending to federal parliamentarians, for her to be sacked from the University of Melbourne. Similarly, when the Adelaide Writers’ Week featured Palestinian authors earlier this year, there was a push for them to be censored.

In her concluding comments, Adler said it was a “tragedy” that those calling for “peace, justice and self-determination for the Palestinian people” were being “silenced.” She noted that “everybody brings their own personal history to these issues.

“My grandfather was murdered in Birkenau because he was Jewish. My father entered the resistance in Paris when he was 14-years of age and his legacy to me is that it is important and it is vital for us not to look away.” Six million Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust as the world “looked away,” Adler said, so “it is incumbent upon humanity to look at what is happening in Gaza now and to say we will not accept this, we will say ‘no, not in our name.’”

Tingle herself had published an article on the ABC’s website Saturday, which included perceptive points on

the STC issue and the broader official campaign over purported antisemitism. She wrote that the response to the actors had revealed a “dangerous reductionism in political debates in Australia.

“This trend, which has now visibly spread to the arts, has been supercharged in recent weeks by politicians who should know better and some media outlets who are fanning outrage and seem to be emphasising only a rise in anti-Semitism in Australia without equally acknowledging a rise in Islamophobia.”

Tingle added: “Support for civilians caught up in the conflict—and a wish for the conflict to end—is taken as endorsement of Hamas, and hostility towards all Jewish people, including members of the Australian Jewish community.”

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion piece on Friday, Ian Maxwell, associate professor of theatre and performance studies, took up the claim that actors should not comment on world events.

Pointing to the hypocrisy of the campaign, Maxwell wrote: “We expect them [actors] to take on risks, to present the big ideas, to pose questions, to stimulate and to challenge. But we also require that they keep their mouths shut, to park their own beliefs and values at the stage door. To behave as good employees, and not to rock the boat.”

The critical comments, as far as they go, point to a deeper and more far-reaching growth of opposition, especially among workers and young people. The genocidal actions of the Israeli regime are exposed for what they are, as are all those forces backing the mass murder, including the Australian Labor government.

The supporters of the war crimes may occupy the top rungs of the political and media establishment, and control the levers of official public opinion, but they cannot control what the vast mass of the population thinks.



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