

# COPMA

## Citizens Opposed To Propaganda Masquerading As Art

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January 29, 2012

Steven A. Rakitt  
Executive Vice President and CEO  
The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington  
6101 Montrose Road  
Rockville, MD 20852

Dear Mr. Rakitt:

We had hoped that our concerns about Ari Roth using Theater J as a propaganda platform for his political agenda to criticize Israel and promote the Palestinian narrative was a thing of the past. Given Roth's recent Theater J blog posts and his statements at a Peace Cafe Theater J reading in November, we are very concerned that the 2012-2013 "Voices from the Middle East Festival" will be a replay of the Israel bashing that has characterized past "festivals." While Ari Roth writes in his Dec. 10-11 blog post from Israel that Theater J has *"something of an identity to live down here (thanks to our past presentations of Kanafani and Churchill) - that we'd rather bash Israel than Islamo-fascism,"* he shows no sign of acknowledging the truth of this international reputation and every sign of continuing the Israel-bashing.

You may already be aware that just two months ago (December, 2011) Ari Roth took a Theater J delegation to Israel to participate in the ISRA-Drama conference. Reading Roth's Theater J blog posts from the conference, we learn that he remains committed to seeking out plays that focus on the alleged mistreatment of Palestinians by brutal and repressive Israelis. Roth writes the following about putting on Khalifa Natour's *"Ulysses on Bottles"* ( a play about a man imprisoned in Israel for trying to sail to Gaza and break the blockade to bring Russian literature to Gazans) and *"In Spitting Distance"* (a play about discrimination against Palestinians and the occupation in Ramallah after 9/11):

**"Well, that would be a Middle East Festival producer's dream, now wouldn't it?"**

At the conference, Roth and his delegation shamed Israel and American Jewry by giving credence to the claims of Israel's worldwide delegitimizers (you will recall the Jimmy Carter shonda) that Israel is an apartheid regime. Stephen Stern on the Theater J blog stated:

*I note with special warmth the impact of the South African delegation, the woman who heads the inspiring Market Theater (alive and independent and speaking loudly throughout Apartheid) and three brilliant and lovely actor/producer/directors.*

***The Market Theatre in Johannesburg.***

*I repeatedly sought out their quiet passion about their own dramatic history of cultures in conflict holding on to a dream, struggling through the glory and pain of seeing it realized, and making music and theatrical art and sharing a national story to inspire the world. I returned to them time and again for response to the passions of Israeli culture we saw expressed.*

Roth himself, in referring to the Israel Palestinian conflict in the context of apartheid, stated:

*"Mt's all importantly eye-opening, and to understand how hatred become embedded – and to wonder whether it can be lifted by a change in political reality we only needed our South African colleagues at the conference to represent the hopeful answer that, yes it can..."*

The depth of political activism engaged in by Roth using Theater J as his front is astounding. While attending the conference, Roth and his delegation traveled to Ramallah seeking to meet with Palestinian theater professionals. Stephen Stern stated that he *"spent months incrementally brokering the possibility of discussions with Palestinian artists on the context of their work."*

The ad or notice circulated months in advance by Stern seeking Palestinians to meet with them demonstrated that the purpose of these meetings was to find ways that Theater J could present the Palestinian narrative in its productions. The notice stated:

***"Theater Delegation: A small international group of theater professionals is seeking meetings to learn from Palestinian theater artists. We wish to engage with Palestinians on how they share their artistic work and point of view in Palestine, with neighbors in the Region, and internationally. Our group of Americans, American Jews, and Israelis have worked in our own artistic environments to present Palestinian narratives to mixed audiences. From each of our differing cultural and national situations, we seek to understand what we might do to help present authentic Palestinian voices, assist Palestinian artists wherever they wish to work and where possible — engage in exchange with Palestinian artists."***

Sadly, Stern and Roth both indicated they were unsuccessful in getting Palestinians to meet with them to help in their effort to *"present Palestinian narratives."*

Roth also says that in 2013 he is hoping to co-produce, with Peter Sinai, Motti Lerner's *"The Admission,"* a play about alleged war crimes committed by Israelis in the 1948 war. Roth writes in his blog that he is determined to put on the play *"PlonTERS,"* which the Israeli government declined to help finance in 2009. *"PlonTERS,"* like *"Return to Haifa,"* is another moral equivalency play in which the audience is induced to compare and equate the killing of a Palestinian youth by the IDF to the planned murder of a settler child by terrorists. This kind of moral equivalency is meant to undermine belief in the rightness of the Israeli struggle for peace and security. Roth writes in his blog,

***"How we want to do this production!"***

Roth is also excited by a new play, *"The Peacock of Silwan"* which will use Israeli and Palestinian actors to tell the story of Silwan, where he alleges:

*"[F]or hundreds of years, Palestinian Arab families have lived in Silwan. In the past, until the city was divided in the 1948 war, a few Jewish families lived with them and next to them. In recent years there has been a concerted effort by settler organizations, Jewish donors from abroad and Israeli authorities to settle Jewish families in the neighborhood while evicting the Palestinian families who've live there for generations. The next plan on the agenda is to demolish the homes of dozens of Palestinian families living next to the valley (the "Siloam Channel") in an area called the "Bustan. "This is where every week violent clashes have been breaking out between the youngsters of Silwan and Israeli security forces, due to increasing friction between the Palestinian residents and the settlers who are gradually moving in. Meanwhile, hordes of tourists flock to the neighborhood as part of a project by the Elad settler organization, which claims to have excavated the ruins of the "City of David" between and under the homes of the Palestinian residents of the neighborhood."*

This biased and historically inaccurate portrayal of the facts of Silwan by Ari Roth tells much about his own political ideology, which determines what plays are selected for production at Theater J. (*see footnote 1, below*)

Roth has also chosen to staff Theater J with others who share his ideology. Jennifer Mendenhall is Theater J's artist in residence this year. She was with Ari Roth at ISRA-Drama and wrote a synopsis of the plays on the Theater J blog. Her synopsis of *"Kochav Yair"* described the play as:

***"[A] play about the damaging effects of serving in the military and oppressing Palestinian people, on the Israeli male psyche."***

Ari Roth comments on Ms. Mendenhall's blog:

***"These write-ups are so valuable. This is frisking brilliant, Jen." (12/10/11 blog)***

Theater J's production of these Israel bashing plays gives them a false legitimacy not only in the United States but in Israel. Motti Lerner, several of whose plays have been produced by Roth, is considered so politically radical in Israel that his recent plays, according to Roth, have been more produced abroad than in Israel. For example, *"The Murder of Isaac,"* which has been described as anti-Semitic by Israeli reviewers, has never been performed in Israel. Theater J paid for its translation into English. Lerner's *"Pangs of the Messiah,"* produced by Theater J in 2007, has not played recently in Israel. It seems that its presentation at Theater J enhanced its prestige and acceptability, and Peter Sinai, director of plays for Theater J, is now staging *"Pangs of the Messiah"* in Israel, along with much of Theater J's repertory. As horrifying as it may seem, Ari Roth's style of political propaganda in American Jewish theater is now being exported to Israel and may be encouraging the production of anti-Israel theater in Israel.

The Washington Post's theater critic, Peter Marks, inclusion of *"Return to Haifa"* in the Post's list of ten best plays of the year, was noted in the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth. Roth, in touting this award, fails to point out that Peter Marks praised the play more for its message than its production value. Marks writes, *"[it] may have been more noteworthy for its conciliator)) outlook on relations between Palestinians and Israelis than for the potency of the staging."* In other words, Marks liked it because he believes its sympathetic message to Palestinians is conciliatory in nature and serves the cause of peace, a view that widely infects most of the Israel-Palestinian journalism of the Washington Post itself. COPMA previously criticized the production of *"Return to Haifa"* because it equated the actual murder of more than a million Jewish children in the Holocaust with a fictional story of an Arab family leaving a child behind as it fled (in terror of Israelis) its home in Haifa during Israel's War of Independence. Peter Marks may have liked the message of *"Return to Haifa,"* but do donors to the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and the DCJCC want theater that is hostile to Israel?

Roth reports in his December 13 blog post that the December Theater J Advisory Council meeting gave him the feeling that he had *"significant"* support for his work. With evidence that Roth has not changed his mission, remains obsessively focused on criticism of Israel, continues to intend to spread a message that Palestinians are mistreated and oppressed by Israelis and plans to continue working with groups that advocate for this viewpoint, we at COPMA are very concerned about future plays and workshops that will be staged at Theater J. The suggestion that Carol Greenwald of COPMA join the Theater J Advisory Council, which bore the promise of keeping avenues of communication open between COPMA and the DCJCC, has not materialized, despite COPMA's willingness.

COPMA is not prepared to wait until programming has already been finalized, and it is too late to influence decisions already made. After reading of Ari Roth's plans on the Theater J

blog, COPMA is not willing to continue on faith that the DCJCC board and the Federation board will act as fiduciaries for the funds entrusted to them to work for the best interests of the Jewish community. We seem to have few options remaining at this point other than taking our campaign public, and we would welcome some action on your part that would address Mr. Roth's recidivism.

Sincerely,

Robert G. Samet  
Chairman  
Citizens Opposed to Propaganda  
Masquerading as Art

*Footnote #1. The play, "The Peacock of Silwan," ignores that:*

- 1. There were Jews living in Silwan as early as 1882 and that the Jewish residents were driven out of their homes by Arab Attacks in the 1920's;*
- 2. For hundreds of years this area was preserved by the Turks and the British as a public area intended for preservation of antiquities, because it is the King's Garden described in Ecclesiastes;*
- 3. The Arab homes built in the King's Garden were built illegally over the last 20 years after the municipality stopped the water run-off into the valley. Arab residential construction, according to the director general of the Antiquities Authority, caused significant and irreversible damage to the antiquities;*
- 4. The City of David is not a project of the right -wing settlers. It is an archeological site that is part of a recognized national park in the State of Israel, excavated by both Israelis and foreign archeologists since the middle of the nineteenth century. To build the archeological park, 22 illegally built Arab homes would be demolished and the residents relocated to other homes. The designated homes were built within the last 20 years illegally. This land has been set aside as conservation parkland with residential building prohibited long before the Arab homes in question were illegally erected. These are facts. The play is propaganda.*

RGS:nst

cc: Carole R. Zawatsky