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Dissent, Discussion, and Censorship in Habima Theatre’s The Merchant of Venice

by

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The inclusion of Habima, Israel’s national theatre, in Shakespeare’s Globe’s 2012 “Globe to Globe Festival” caused an absolute uproar in the artistic and political community. Most artists and politicians agreed that including the Hebrew *language* itself in the festival was a crucial aspect of such a global event. The Globe wrote on their official Facebook page that, “the festival was intended as, and has become, a celebration of languages and not… a celebration of nations or states. Habima are the most well-known and respected Hebrew-language theatre company in the world, and are a natural choice to any programmer wishing to host a dramatic production in Hebrew.”¹ That being said, many had qualms with the fact that Habima received 30% of its funding from the Israeli government and had performed multiple times in West Bank settlements such as Ariel. Prominent artistic figures argued that Habima, and in effect the Globe, were complicit in human rights violations and illegal colonization if the production was allowed to continue as part of the festival. On the opposing side of the debate, Ilan Ronen, the Artistic Director of Habima, and other internationally-renowned artists publicly rejected the idea that any art should be censored or excluded due to the politics of its mother country, and that the purpose of art is to build bridges and open dialogues.² Ilan Ronen knew that the event would include pre-show airport-style security screenings

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and heavy protests inside and outside the theatre, and I will argue that he intended for these disruptions to be a part of his production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Through a close reading of the nature of Shylock and Antonio’s bond in *The Merchant of Venice*, an exploration of Ronen’s views on the purpose and power of theatre, and an analysis of the 2012 production and the way in which the Globe dealt with protestors, I argue that Ronen’s hopes for his adaptation were undermined by a theatre community more committed to theatre etiquette than to theatre for social change.

*The Merchant of Venice* has remained controversial since its publication. The play’s protagonist, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in 16th century Venice, can also be cast as the play’s antagonist, depending on one’s reading of the text. The combination of Shylock’s subjugation and marginalized status as a Jew in Venice coupled with his desire to receive a vicious bond of one pound of flesh from his enemy, Antonio, has posed fascinating questions on justice, revenge, empathy, and forgiveness over the past four centuries. Stephen Marche of *The New York Times* writes that, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the various portrayals of Shylock have long served as a way for Habima to act out different iterations of Israeli identity and to express Israel’s changing position in the world.”³ So what aspect of the text lends itself so seamlessly to this kind of fluctuating interpretation? I would argue that the nature of the bond between Shylock and Antonio—muddied by prejudice and ancient grudge—allows for this continual reinterpretation.

The atmosphere in which Antonio and Shylock’s infamous bond is forged conveys much about Shylock’s status as a Jew in 16th century Venice. Even before Antonio enters the room, Shylock mutters, “If I can catch him once upon the hip,/ I will

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feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him./ He hates our sacred nation…/Cursèd be my tribe
If I forgive him.”4 (1.3) Shylock’s animosity towards Antonio, and Christians for that
matter (“I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3)5), compels him to seek revenge on behalf
of his people. For Shylock, he creates the bond, not simply out of personal spite, but as a
symbol of resistance for the Jewish community. In the courtroom scene, in which
Antonio and his closest friends beg for mercy from Shylock, Shylock replies, “So can I
give no reason, nor I will not/More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing I b
Antonio, that I follow thus/A losing suit against him.”6 (4.1) While some may view
Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock as a bloodthirsty monster in this scene to be evidence
of the playwright’s anti-Semitic nature, I maintain that Shakespeare presents a character
so worn down by systematic prejudice and day-to-day oppression that extracting revenge
becomes the one thing Shylock can hold on to. In act three, Shylock explains, “He
[Antonio] hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends.
Heated mine enemies. And what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?7” (3.1)
Just as Shylock sees his identity and the identity of his people threatened daily for no
reason besides their marginalized label, Shylock needs no other reason than internalized
shame and hatred to follow his bond with Antonio to its bloody conclusion. This idea of
oppression as justification for violence is the aspect of this play, as made clear in
interviews, that most attracted Ilan Ronen to it. The environment of loathing and mistrust
as well as the uneven power dynamic between Shylock and Antonio in which their bond

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
is forged makes this play ripe for interpretation and applicable to the political and social events of many different time periods.

While Habima used Shylock in a 1967 production as “an allegory of Jewish oppression, and a justification for the existence of a Jewish homeland in Israel,” after the Arab-Israeli War, many hoped that Habima’s 2012 performance of Merchant would focus instead on Palestinian oppression. On the Middle East news website, Mondoweiss, Eleanor Kilroy discusses The Merchant of Venice’s textual possibilities for a “politically and morally conscious” 2012 adaptation. The scholar of 16th century literature with whom she spoke suggested that Shylock could be transformed into an explicitly Palestinian figure and that Israeli-Palestinian conflict “demands” that the Habima artists explicitly address the alleged injustices in which they are indirectly involved. Kilroy presents us with our first view on the duty of art: the obligation to use themes, characters, and interpretation to present a clear-cut social agenda and moral viewpoint.

Writers and artists such as Eleanor Kilroy hoping for such an explicit pro-Palestinian message were deeply disappointed by Ronen’s presentation at the 2012 “Globe to Globe Festival.” Ronen chose to focus more broadly on the bonds that tie each of the characters in the Merchant of Venice, rather than on the Palestinian condition specifically. The play itself was not set in modern-day, but rather in a strikingly vivid portrayal of 16th century Venice. Conceptually, the production hinged upon ropes hanging from the ceiling that entangle each of the characters at key moments throughout the play, signifying the way each character is trapped or restrained by some form of bond. As for Shylock, most critics agree that actor Yaakov Cohen’s Shylock was anything but

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the villain. Michael Handelzalts writes for *Haaretz*, “He succeeds in causing the audience to feel for the character and see what the plot—within the play and outside of it—does to him…You see him hurting time and again. He demands vengeance and he succeeds in arousing the feeling that he deserves his vengeance.” Ronen’s production solicited the audiences’ empathy from the very first scene in which Shylock and Tubal, returning from synagogue, are violently attacked by joyful, masked Venetians and tied up by their *tefillin*. From that moment on, Handelzalts writes, “Whatever he does will not compare to what they have done to him. After what was done to the Jews, they see themselves as entitled to take revenge.” Ronen also decided to end the production with the striking image of Shylock leaving the stage holding nothing but a suitcase, “back bent, to another exile.” Through the emphasis on bonds and Shylock’s character arc throughout the play, Ronen presented a *Merchant of Venice* centered on unjust power dynamics and oppression as a justification for violence, but without any adaptive choices that could be specifically tied to the Palestinian condition.

An account of the 2012 production would not be complete without a description of the protests that took place—protests that inescapably shaped audience members’ experience of the show. The untraditional theatre-going experience began outside the theatre walls, where audience members received full pat-downs and metal detector checks before entering the theatre. After an opening address by the Globe’s Artistic Director himself (a peculiarity which speaks to the exceptional and precarious nature of this performance), the show began. Throughout the performance, pro-Palestinian banners and flags were unfurled at different times, a group wearing tape over their mouths stood

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.
in silent protest to signify the silencing of the Palestinian narrative, and, maybe most strikingly, two men shouted out “Hath not a Palestinian eyes?” during the trial scene. The protests did not specifically target Habima Theatre for their involvement in West Bank settlements or financial agreement with the Israeli government, but rather espoused a general Pro-Palestinian message, criticizing the governments’ treatment of Arabs living in Israel.\(^\text{12}\)

Without any knowledge of Ilan Ronen’s view on the place and power of theatre, one might dismiss attempts to tie his version of *The Merchant of Venice* to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is it not acceptable for an artist living in a region of conflict to create a piece that is not in conversation with current socio and geo-political tensions? Is it so ridiculous that an Israeli director would want to director a Shakespeare play that is not framed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Generally, I would think not, but due to the content of multiple interviews with Ronen, I would argue that the interplay between art, dissent, and political discussion is key to all of Ronen’s artistic works. In Boyd Tonkins’ article, “Artists Should Not Boycott Other Artists,” Ronen clarifies his intention to engage in stories of “migration, of exile, of displacement,” and avows his commitment to “create dialogue with Palestinian artists.”\(^\text{13}\) Most pertinent to the discussion of a “politically and morally conscious” *Merchant of Venice* is Ronen’s stance on Shylock. Shylock, Ronen says, “creates a lot of empathy. There's no aggression coming from him. You feel that he's victim rather than a villain. He's a result of the circumstances he's been living in. Politically, when you push someone to the edge, he can be very violent. This is

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what happens to minorities.” Ronen intended to create a production centering on a marginalized man forced to drastic measures due to oppressive political conditions. He goes on to compare Shylock’s desire for revenge to a *shahid*, an Arabic word commonly used to mean a suicide bomber. For a production that met with an onslaught of backlash from the pro-Palestinian community for simply existing, the director’s insinuation that his Shylock could be an emotional investigation into the escalation of Islamic extremism and Palestinian aggression is remarkable, if not, ironic.

Ronen’s socio-politically charged conception of Shylock and accompanying decision *not* to include any clear-cut or specific references to any socio-political issue in his production speak to his viewpoint on the purpose of art as a whole. Ronen intended to spark discussion, contention, and disagreement rather than provide any answers. His notion of dissent’s crucial place in any artistic venture leads me to believe that the protests and controversy surrounding his 2012 *Merchant of Venice* were, in fact, part of his performance. In an article for *The Times of Israel*, discussing Habima’s reinvigorated artistic mission, Ronen explains, “Our job is to represent Israel’s maturation, the issues of the day, our national history, as well as what is the meaning of being Israeli today…the audience isn’t just looking for plays that are light and easy, but the tough stuff as well, the things that are happening two meters away from us.” Even with the financial backing from the Israeli government, Habima did not shy away from contentious topics for Israelis—such as African refugees seeking asylum in Israel or the social protests on Rothschild Boulevard. Ronen elaborates, “These are issues filled with tension and

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But it’s the basis for dialogue and that’s something concrete. It was the same with the Globe. They could have chosen a lot of other Shakespearean plays, but they chose one that would have meaningful dialogue and that is fraught with the issue of identity.” Ronen’s artistic commitment to “discuss and disagree” leads me to the conversation of censorship in the arts.

While Ronen believes that theatre’s function should be to create dialogue with “people who are against my ideology,” many other theatre makers take a different approach. Emma Thompson, Mark Rylance, and the 37 other prominent theatre artists who signed the petition against Habima’s appearance at the “Globe to Globe Festival” did not want to allow Ronan the platform to begin an open dialogue. Nicola Zreineh, an actor in the Palestinian Ashtar Theatre, who also performed at the 2012 “Globe to Globe Festival,” explained that “For us as Palestinians, we call for a boycott for as long as we are under military occupation; for as long as there is no justice in our country; for as long as we are deprived of very basic rights as human beings.” Ronen could not oppose more vehemently this all-or-nothing BDS mindset, asserting that the boycotting of art by other artists is inherently wrong. He was not alone—lauded novelist, Howard Jacobson, and other prominent actors and playwrights equated artistic censorship of other artists in this context as an act of “self-harm,” or an act equivalent to “Nazi-era book burning.”

While Ronen espoused the necessity of dissent and disagreement within the arts, the actual presentation and reception of dissent in the 2012 Merchant of Venice

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
performance told a very different story. On his theatre review blog, Dr. Peter Kirwan describes his experience as an audience member. On hearing the pre-show welcome speech of Dominic Dromgoole, the artistic director of The Globe, Kirwan was “troubled by some of the ways in which he framed the expectations for the evening.” Mr. Dromgoole told the audience light-heatedly that the Globe was accustomed to dealing with mid-show disturbances—pigeons, cell phones, fainting, planes—and urged audience members to treat the inevitable protests as they would any of these more mundane disturbances. Kirwan writes, “To reduce the disruption of protestors pre-emptively to the accidental/occasional disruption of a pigeon was a rhetorical strategy I found unnecessarily demeaning.” Furthermore, Dromgoole’s welcome speech emphasized that the actors on stage were not politicians, but rather actors telling a story and “aiming to understand and to criticize, and to help make the world a better place.” In a theater with at least fifty security guards surrounding the stage, throughout the pit, and standing guard in all the galleries ready to evict all protestors, Dromgoole’s assertion that art can make the world a better place was viewed as patronizing by many. Even more disturbing to Kirwan was, not the eviction of pro-Palestinian protestors throughout the show, but the audience members’ reactions to these protestors. Many audience members became more focused on pointing out protestors to security than on the show itself. Audience members would jeer as activists were evicted by security, and when one man yelled “piss off!” to a protestor during the trial scene, his comment was met with hearty laughs throughout the audience. Except for the verbal disturbance during the trial scene, all protests were peaceful and silent. Kirwan wrote, “I have never felt quite so intimidated, tense and

uncomfortable at the behavior of the people around me as I did tonight at the Globe, and it was the aggressive interventions of the non-protestors themselves that prompted most of these feelings.\textsuperscript{25} For a show whose director maintained that “We should have a dialogue with everybody. We should discuss and disagree,”\textsuperscript{26} the atmosphere of aggression and hostile dedication to theater etiquette created at the Globe seems contrary to Ronen’s hopes for such a production. As Peter Kirwan asked, “What has been learned from a production so concerned with suppression, if suppression is taking place within the auditorium?”\textsuperscript{27} I would argue that Ilan Ronen proves himself more dedicated to spurring discussion and debate in the artistic world than he is married to traditional conventions of theatre and Shakespearean theatre.

The interview with Ronen for \textit{The Independent} conveys his lens for the production: one in which Shylock represents the voice of an exasperated, marginalized minority. Whether or not this voice was intended to be distinctly Palestinian is certainly up for discussion, but the mob-mentality of the audience in silencing protestors throughout the performance seems similar to the censorship of voices that Ronen so vehemently opposed in the debate over Habima’s right to perform in the festival. The debate over Habima Theatre’s inclusion in the 2012 “Globe to Globe Festival” not only added another chapter to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Middle East, but also posed larger questions on the place of artistic boycott, dissent, and censorship that have reverberated around the world.
