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DC JCC Continues Pattern of Promoting Viciously anti-Israel Plays

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Ari Roth is the artistic director of Theater J in Washington, D.C. Theater J in 2011.

The Washington, D.C. Jewish Community Center has a live theater component, known as Theater J. For years Theater J has been the object of criticism from the pro-Israel world because its director, Ari Roth, promotes plays - either by staging them or having readings - which are profoundly anti-Israel.

And now Roth has done it again.

The latest play to draw the ire of Israel supporters is "The Admission." It is a play written by Motti Lerner, who was also the playwright of "Return to Haifa." The latter play, the adaptation of a novella written by the spokesperson for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was staged by

The PFLP is an Arab Palestinian terrorist group, designated as such by the U.S. government. The PFLP's specialty was airplane hijackings - perhaps you've heard of the Entebbe hijacking? That was one of theirs. But they like to diversify: in October, 2001, the PFLP assassinated Rehavam Ze'evi, a member of Knesset. The PFLP also staged homicide bombings. The goal of the PFLP is to create a democratic socialist state in Palestine. En route to their goal, they seek the complete destruction of the state of Israel.

When "Return to Haifa" was shown at Theater J, a pro-Israel grassroots organization sent a letter to the D.C. Federation, complaining about such a play being promoted at a Federation-sponsored venue.

Roth responded to the critical letter by stating that it "is not a prerogative of the donor" to intervene in artistic content, and claimed that attempts to limit the theater's activities amounted to censorship or blacklisting. David Makowsky grew up in Chicago, and told The Jewish Press he well remembers Ari Roth. "He was a bully then and it sounds like he's still a bully today."

"The Admission's" Lerner explained in an interview earlier this year that it was Theater J's Roth who initiated contact about "The Admission" back in 2010. It was Roth's initiative that encouraged Lerner to work with an English speaker and translate the play, which was in Hebrew and Arabic, into English.

Appointing and then keeping someone who brought to the stage of a Jewish Community Center the handiwork of a leader of a group dedicated to eradicating the Jewish state is a disappointment to many. surprising choice as someone who makes their living from the donations of Jews who think they are giving money for Jewish causes.

Not surprisingly, there are a number of people in the Washington, D.C. community who find Roth's taste in drama repugnant, who have been trying for several years to bring the dirty back tale of Theater J to the attention of the national and international pro-Israel community, as their efforts thus far have fallen on deaf ears at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and at the Washington, D.C. JCC leadership.

Louis Offen, a Rockville, Maryland resident, told The Jewish Press that he used to contribute substantially more to the D.C. Federation before he "was put off by the Theater J business and the failure of Federation and the DC JCC director to put an end to Ari Roth's use of Theater J in the service of his personal politics."

The organization Citizens Opposed to Propaganda Masquerading as Art - COPMA - was formed in 2009, after another of Roth's choices, "Seven Jewish Children" was staged at Theater J. That play is a series of seven one minute plays, in which a group of parents or relatives are discussing what to tell their Jewish Israeli children about "the situation," and what should be kept from the children. The actors quickly reinforce every horrible anti-Israel canard, by showing parents keeping the truths from their children. For example, one line is: "No but don't tell her Arabs used to sleep in her bedroom." In one of the plays, water that is supposed to be for the fields of Arabs is instead used for Israelis' swimming pool, "Tell her it's our water, we have the right."

COPMA, like New York City's JCC Watch, is a grass roots effort to inform pro-Israel people about Jewish institutions that are using Jewish communal dollars to fund programs that are harmful to Israel.

In a widely-circulated email sent out on Monday, August 20, COPMA explains that several significant plays that have been promoted at Theater J in the last few years.

These plays that defame Israel have been going on for years, and our efforts to stop them have been rejected. Although you never intended your charity dollars to be used to attack Israel, the Federation is doing exactly that by using your contributions to provide a substantial source of the operating funds of Theater J. Even worse, Theater J boasts that it is a partner organization to The Federation, thereby using the Federation's name to endorse its anti-Israel program.

For COPMA, "The Admission," is a red line. It reads like a fleshed out version of one or two of the mini-plays in Caryl Churchill's "Seven Jewish Children." Or for those who are not familiar with that play, picture Der Stürmer magazine's worst caricatures.

The protagonist, Avigdor, was a colonel in the Israeli War of Independence. We learn during the course of the play that although Avigdor had not admitted it before, his and two other companies attacked the Arab (fictional) village of Jirin, located near Haifa. Avigdor admits that fourteen Arabs were killed (that's Avigdor's count, a "history book" claims 96 Arabs were killed) in the yard of a mosque, no less.

When the play takes place, Avigdor is a big developer. His company is in the process of bulldozing over the graves of those who were killed, along with the homes currently populating the Arab village. Oh, and for good measure, Avigdor is also working furiously to get a local Arab girl to leave town because Avigdor's son is in love with her, and the family doesn't want him to be involved with an Arab.

Like JCC Watch, COPMA asks supporters of Israel to consider reducing or eliminating their contributions to the local Federation. COPMA points out that their criticism should not be met with cries about freedom of expression.

Ari Roth, the agenda-driven artistic director of Theater J, is free to stage any shameful attack on Israel that he feels driven to launch. However, he should not be supported by funds contributed by those in the Jewish Community who love and continue to defend Israel. And he should NOT be permitted to continue his anti-Israel propaganda on a stage having the endorsement and imprimatur of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.

The Jewish Press spoke with Carol Greenwald, treasurer of COPMA, about the effort to send a financial message to the Federation. Greenwald understands very well what it means to have a financial impact on an institution in order to encourage change. She has a PhD in macroeconomics from Columbia University.

"It is a tragedy when Jewish leaders refuse to stand up to support Israel. But it is actually against the law when Federation leadership accept Jewish charity money and then use it to defame Israel. That's a violation of their fiduciary duty, and something for which they can and should be held accountable," Greenwald explained.

Sondra Kloner lives in Chevy Chase, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. When contacted by The Jewish Press, Kloner said she was "very much opposed" to what goes on at Theater J.

"There are enough people out there trying to encourage Jewish youth to be anti-Israel. I don't think the Federation should be supporting this, and I don't think the money I give to Federation should be used for this," Kloner said.

"The Admission" has not yet been staged in Israel, although it is scheduled to open there this November. It had already been scheduled for productions in three different theaters, but all three productions were canceled.

"I can only guess that there were fears and perhaps pressures that led to it. You can also guess that these pressures had to do with the huge difficulties we face in Israel and in Jewish communities outside of Israel to discuss the events of the 1948 war that led to a conflict that is still unresolved," Lerner said.

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