

Ethnic Profiling at Tel Aviv Airport

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Israeli security officers at Tel-Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport Tuesday forced an African-American member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — by far the best-known touring company in the United States — to perform twice for them in order to prove he was a dancer before letting him enter the country with the dance company, the dancer told the Associated Press. But even after he complied, one of the officers suggested that Abdur-Rahim Jackson change his name. Jackson felt humiliated and “deeply saddened,” according to an Ailey spokesperson, particularly because his Arab/Muslim sounding first name, given to him by his Muslim father, was the reason that he was the only member of his company subjected to this typical Israeli ethnic profiling.

While still officially illegal in the U.S., ethnic profiling, described as “racist” by human rights groups, is widespread in Israel, at entrances to malls, public and private buildings, airports, etcetera. Israeli citizens and permanent residents with Arab names — or often just Arab accents — are commonly singled out for rough, intrusive and glaringly humiliating “security” checks. When I, an Israeli-ID holder, travel through the Tel Aviv airport, for instance, I always get stickers with the number “6” stamped on my passport, luggage and ticket. Israeli Jews, in comparison, get “1” or “2.” A “6” leads to the most thorough and degrading check of luggage and person. The smaller figures, in comparison, mean you get whisked through security with just an x-ray scan of your luggage. A couple of years ago, people like me used to get a bright red sticker, while Israeli Jews got light pink or similarly “benign” colors. Some astute Israeli officials must have been alerted that color-coding passengers according to their ethnicity and/or religion was too overtly apartheid-like, so they switched to the supposedly “nuanced” number coding. No wonder Nobel-prize winning South African Bishop and anti-Apartheid leader Desmond Tutu described Israeli practices as constituting a “worse” form of apartheid — it is far more sophisticated than the original version.

The Alvin Ailey troupe is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a multi-nation tour starting in Israel. Despite the above incident, the show was scheduled to go on as scheduled Thursday, and the company did nothing substantial to even protest this discriminatory policy to which one of its members was subjected, notwithstanding artistic director Judith Jamison's statement to Haaretz newspaper that “We are here to irritate you, to make you think.” This only enhances Israel's impunity. More crucially, by its very performance in Israel, regardless of whether one of its members was targeted by Israeli ethnic profiling or not, the group has violated the cultural boycott called for by Palestinian civil society since 2004 against Israel due to its persistent violation of international law and fundamental human rights.

Two years after that initial boycott call, a large majority of Palestinian artists and cultural workers appealed to all artists and filmmakers of good conscience around the world “to cancel all exhibitions and other cultural events that are scheduled to occur in Israel, to

mobilize immediately and not allow the continuation of the Israeli offensive to breed complacency.” As with the boycott of South African cultural institutions during apartheid, international cultural workers and groups are urged by their Palestinian colleagues to “speak out against the current Israeli war crimes and atrocities.” Many internationally recognized artists and intellectuals heeded the Palestinian appeal for boycott; those included John Berger, Ken Loach, Jean-Luc Godard, the Irish artists union, Aosdana, and Belgian dance company Les Ballets C. de la B. The latter published a statement defending the cultural boycott as “a legitimate, unambiguous and nonviolent way of exerting additional pressure on those responsible.”

In 1965, the American Committee on Africa, following the lead of prominent British arts associations, sponsored a historic declaration against South African apartheid, signed by more than 60 cultural personalities. It read: “We say no to apartheid. We take this pledge in solemn resolve to refuse any encouragement of, or indeed, any professional association with the present Republic of South Africa, this until the day when all its people shall equally enjoy the educational and cultural advantages of that rich and beautiful land.”

If one were to replace “Republic of South Africa” with the “State of Israel,” the rest should apply just as strongly. Israel today, 60 years after its establishment through what prominent Israeli historian Ilan Pappé describes as a deliberate and systemic process of ethnic cleansing of a large majority of the indigenous Palestinian population, still practices racial discrimination against its own “non-Jewish” citizens; it still maintains the longest military occupation in modern history; it still denies millions of Palestinian refugees their internationally recognized right to return to their homes and properties; and it still commits war crimes and violates basic human rights and tenets of international humanitarian law with utter impunity.

Some may argue that, from their viewpoint, art should transcend political division, unifying people in their common humanity. They forget, it seems, that masters and slaves do not quite share anything in common, least of all any notion of humanity. Rather than reinventing the wheel, I recall the wise words of Enuga S. Reddy, director of the United Nations Center Against Apartheid, who in 1984 responded to criticism that the cultural boycott of South Africa infringed on freedom of expression, saying: “It is rather strange, to say the least, that the South African regime which denies all freedoms... to the African majority... should become a defender of the freedom of artists and sportsmen of the world. We have a list of people who have performed in South Africa because of ignorance of the situation or the lure of money or unconcern over racism. They need to be persuaded to stop entertaining apartheid, to stop profiting from apartheid money and to stop serving the propaganda purposes of the apartheid regime.”

Humanity — and above all human dignity — is at the core of many of the works of Alvin Ailey. His company, and indeed all other artists and cultural entities that care about human rights and realize that art and moral responsibility should not be divorced at any time, are called upon by their Palestinian colleagues and public at large not to perform in Israel until justice, freedom, equality and human rights are established for all, irrespective of ethnic, religious, gender or any other form of identity. This is what the arts and academic (Ailey co-directs a degree program at Fordham University) community did as their contribution to the struggle to end apartheid rule in South Africa. This is precisely what they can do to end injustice and colonial conflict in Palestine. Only then can dancers named Abdur-Rahim, Fatima, Paul or Nurit be viewed and treated equally, without any profiling.

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