

Open letter concerning the Batsheva Dance Company

Geneva, November 9, 2017

Dear Dancers, Spectators and People working in the cultural field,

BDS Geneva has learned that the Israeli dance company Batsheva will be performing *Last Work* in December. It has been invited by the Association for Contemporary Dance (ADC) and by The Forum Meyrin Theatre.

Contrary to what some people believe, it is extremely rare for BDS campaigns to alert public opinion about Israeli artists. Many Israeli artists come to Geneva every year and this has never been an issue for us as the BDS (Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanction) movement refuses to boycott artists. Nevertheless the Batsheva Company's links with Israeli diplomacy needs to be examined seriously.

If only we could applaud the Batsheva company for the quality and the beauty of its choreography and for its place in modern dance. But unfortunately the Batsheva Company is more than that. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has awarded the company the significant rank of ambassador: "perhaps the best-known global ambassador of Israeli culture". This statement can be found on the website of the Ministry.¹ And the Batsheva Company itself mentions in its annual report that the Division of Cultural and Scientific Affairs (DCSA) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one of the two principle sources of funding. What are the implications of such grants?

The DCSA's mission is to pilot Israeli cultural propaganda through consulates and embassies abroad. But, in an article published in 2008, the writer Yitzhak Laor revealed that in exchange for DCSA funding, the artist "is aware that the purpose of ordering services from him is to promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art, including contributing to creating a positive image for Israel".² While Forum Meyrin has mentioned support of the Israeli Embassy in France for the creation of *Last Work*, the ADC curiously chose to omit mention this in its communication.

Ohad Naharin, the director of the Batsheva Company for the past 27 years, is justifiably an acclaimed artist. However he isn't only that. In 2016 he took part in the Herzliya Conference, a conference similar to the Davos Forum that brings together each year the top people in politics, diplomacy, business and the military to discuss the question of security and foreign policy. During this conference Ohad Naharin played the role of the court jester. This is quite far removed from the artistic persona that he promotes as an oppositional figure who throws its body into battle "before surrendering" or "being fired". With these types of slogans in their programs, the two Geneva institutions peddle the legend of a subversive Ohad Naharin while in fact this "legend" is compromised by his participation at the highest level in the institutional reflexion concerning the stated strategy of the State of Israel.³

¹ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. CULTURE : DANCE
<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Culture/Pages/Culture-%20Dance.aspx>

² Yitzhak Laor ; « Putting out a contract on Arts » ; Haaretz (25.07.2008)
<https://www.haaretz.com/putting-out-a-contract-on-art-1.250388>

³ 16th Herzliya Conference, June 14-16, 2016: Speakers <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/?CategoryID=557>

We were astonished to learn that two Geneva cultural institutions, that are familiar with the stakes and the implications of international tours, are getting ready to welcome a cultural embassy of a regime that violates, with total impunity, each of the United Nations resolutions and shows no respect for international humanitarian law; a regime that hundreds of Swiss artists have condemned on several occasions for its system of colonialism and apartheid. Remember that in 2014, more than 600 artists and people working in the cultural field from all over Switzerland protested against the bombing of the Gaza Strip.⁴ In 2011, dozens of artists in Switzerland, including dance companies, took up the Palestinian call for a boycott, disinvestments and sanction of the Israeli regime for as long as this state of affairs continues.⁵

The Israeli regime has locked up the Palestinians in Bantustans in the West Bank and in Gaza. Its government seriously discriminates against those Palestinians who live under its' direct jurisdiction. And to mention only culture, the Batsheva Company receives almost 6 million Swiss francs (21,4 million NIS) coming from private funding and public subventions, while the entire cultural budget allotted for the 1'500'000 Palestinians, citizens of Israel, amounts to 5 million Swiss francs (18 million NIS). This means that 20% of the Israeli population receives only 5 million Swiss francs, a sum less than the money the Batsheva company receives yearly for its hundred employees.⁶ This is a flagrant denial of cultural rights.

Worse, in the past few years, official censorship has fallen on Palestinian artists who refuse to be docile. In June 2015, the Al Midan Theatre in Haifa had its funding cut off after having staged a play about Palestinian political prisoners. Unable to pay the salaries, it has stopped all activities this year.⁷ Did anyone hear Ohan Naharin speak out? No and yet his reputation as a dissident remains intact.

So we ask the following question: Is Batsheva still culture? What should be done so that our applause for dancers isn't stained and recuperated by a regime that hides behind projectors to deflect our attention away from its criminal policies?

We have put forth our arguments. We now feel that every one of us has the necessary tools to decide how to respond to the offer of performances, traineeship, workshops and films that are proposed between Saturday December 16th and Tuesday December 19th 2017 on the occasion of Batsheva's venue in Geneva.

Sincerely

BDS-Genève and BDS Switzerland

⁴ Des artistes contre la collaboration militaire avec Israël (02.10.2014) <https://www.bds-info.ch/index.php?id=460&items=1277>

⁵ « Nous refusons d'être complice » Déclaration des artistes en Suisse en réponse à l'appel des Palestiniens à la solidarité (19.11.2011) <https://www.bds-info.ch/index.php?id=460&items=1070>

⁶ Batsheva Dance Company. Annual reports: 2016 https://batsheva.co.il/en/about?open=reports_documents

⁷ « Our people will open Al-Midan: Theatre refuses to die in face of Israeli funding axe » ; Middle East Eye /22.05.2017) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/Arabic-language-speaking-theatre-refuse-to-die-in-face-of-funding-axe-1119832414>