

Why are the ballets of Lausanne and Geneva dancing with apartheid?

An open letter to the Béjart Ballet Lausanne and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève

Basel, Lausanne, Geneva, 28 September 2016

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have learned that the Béjart Ballet Lausanne (BBL) and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève (GTG) are on the program of the Tel Aviv Opera (Israel Opera) for this dance season.¹

The BDS movement in Switzerland wishes to draw your attention, as well as that of the city officials of Lausanne and Geneva, to the incongruity of seeing two recognized Swiss cultural ambassadors compromising themselves with a regime that practices occupation and apartheid. The Israeli government, full of praise for your reputation, fervently hopes to benefit from your prestige and bask in your aura. However since 2004, the Palestinian organizations that are representative of people working in the cultural field, have asked artists worldwide to show solidarity with their fight for freedom by refusing to collaborate with the Israeli cultural institutions.² In 2006 Palestinian artists called upon artists with conscience throughout the world to boycott Israeli cultural manifestations.³ We think that the dancers of BBL and of the Grand Théâtre should be informed of this situation as well as the adventure you are about to embark on. This is why we ask you to circulate this letter among the dancers.

The city where you will perform, Tel Aviv, is less than 20 kilometers from the West Bank where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live, confined behind the more than 700-kilometer Separation Wall and dozens of checkpoints. They will not be able to attend your performances because they have no freedom of movement. Inside this occupied Palestinian territory, Israeli settlements continue to grow under military protection. Soldiers driving huge bulldozers destroy homes, schools, fields, and children's playgrounds, infrastructures that have often been financed by the European Union.⁴ And water, so essential to the health of all, especially performing artists, is under the total control of the occupiers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), who open and close the taps as they please.⁵ The State of Israel has been condemned regularly for its human rights violations. It doesn't care about the calls to respect the 4th Geneva Convention because the international community doesn't act.⁶

Each year, Palestinian artists are refused the right to leave Gaza or the West Bank, like the performer Khaled Jarrar in 2014, who was prevented by the Israeli authorities from going to New York to present his works at the New Museum of Manhattan.⁷

With about 18,000 subscribers, the Tel Aviv Opera receives \$7.4 million in government funds each year out of a total budget of \$26.4 million. Meanwhile, public funding for the cultural life of the Palestinian population of the State of Israel (1.5 million citizens) is limited to \$2.5 million. That works out to \$7.4 million for 18,000 fans of occidental culture compared to \$2.5 million for the entire cultural life of 20% of the population of the country.^{8,9} These figures illustrate the social and racist contempt that the regime has had for the Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel for almost 70

years. “A desperately determined majority in the country (Israel) does not recognize the Arabs’ right to live,” observed the writer Sayed Kashua, as he left Jerusalem to go into exile with his wife and children two years ago.¹⁰ The activist Ronnie Barkan and the actor Saleh Bakri said at the Locarno Film Festival last year “Both of us have Israeli citizenship, but we are not treated in the same way”.¹¹ Given these conditions, every foreign artist who accepts to perform in an Israeli cultural institution is participating, consciously or unwittingly, in the consolidation of this regime.

The Israeli tours of the Béjart Ballet Lausanne and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève coincide with one of the darkest periods for freedom of expression. The Israeli government has multiplied threats and proposed legal measures against associations defending human rights. Chen Tamir, curator of The Centre for Contemporary Arts in Tel Aviv, has noted that Israeli artists can lose their public subventions if their work doesn’t “reflect governmental policies”.¹² Today the Israeli parliament is studying proposed legislation concerning “cultural loyalty” that would sanction any criticism of the State.¹³ So the Béjart Ballet and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre will be arriving in Tel Aviv at a time when any form of contestation is outlawed and any form of criticism is suspect. Only polished form and innocuous content are welcome.

Given these conditions, why are the Béjart Ballet Lausanne and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre honoring a system of apartheid with their *pas de deux*? From institutions of such importance, one would hope for a better understanding of the political stakes when organizing tours. This is especially important given the fact as they are heavily subsidized to promote the brand image of the cities of Lausanne and Geneva throughout the world and not to tarnish it.

Anyone can make mistakes, but we can try not to repeat them. In 1984, while thousands of artists all over the world were standing beside the South African people and boycotting the glitter of apartheid, the group Queen performed at Sun City to the delight of the white racist regime.¹⁴ The same is happening with Israeli apartheid. For ten years now, thousands of artists, as well as people working in the cultural field throughout the world, in Switzerland as well, have defied the regime by adhering to the cultural boycott launched by their Palestinian colleagues.^{15 16 17} In 2016, ladies and gentlemen of the Béjart Ballet Lausanne and the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, it is your turn to stand on the side of freedom and justice. We invite you to take the time to read the accompanying documentation. We would gladly answer any further questions you might have.

Sincerely yours,

BDS Switzerland

Notes

- 1 The Israeli Opera Tel-Aviv-Yafo, Dance season 2016-17 <http://www.israel-opera.co.il/eng/?CategoryID=810>
- 2 *Call for Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel* (Ramallah, July 4, 2004) http://pacbi.org/pacbi140812/?page_id=2555
- 3 *Palestinian Filmmakers, Artists and Cultural Workers Call for a Cultural Boycott of Israel* (August 4, 2006) <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=315>
- 4 "Cisjordanie : les bulldozers israéliens ne chôment pas" (Danièle Kriegel; *Le Point*, 15 avril 2016) http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/cisjordanie-les-bulldozers-israeliens-ne-choment-pas-15-04-2016-2032637_24.php
- 5 "Israel's hydro-apartheid keeps West Bank thirsty" (Charlotte Silver, *The Electronic intifada*, August 1, 2016) <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/charlotte-silver/israels-hydro-apartheid-keeps-west-bank-thirsty>
- 6 Israël, l'éternel dissident international (Jean-Claude Woillet, *Mediapart*, 12 août 2014) <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/120814/israel-leternel-dissident-international>
- 7 "The Palestinian Artist Trapped in the West Bank: 'Every Minute, for Me, Was Like a Knife in My Heart.'" (Justin Jones; *The Daily Beast*, July 16th, 2014) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/16/the-palestinian-artist-trapped-in-the-west-bank-every-minute-for-me-was-like-a-knife-in-my-heart.html>
- 8 "Hanna Munitz stepping down as Israel Opera director" (Helen Kaye, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 28, 2016) <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Culture/Hanna-Munitz-stepping-down-as-Israel-Opera-director-449466>
- 9 "Culture minister to double budget for Arab sector" (*The Times of Israel*, March 10, 2016) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/culture-minister-to-double-budget-for-arab-sector/>
- 10 "Toutes les raisons pour lesquelles je quitte Israël" (Sayed Kashua, *Libération* (Tribune), 15 juillet 2014) http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/07/15/toutes-les-raisons-pour-lesquelles-je-quitte-israel_1064343
- 11 Vidéo "Press Vidéo conference: Cooperation of Festival del Film Locarno with Israel Film Fund" (Teatro dei Fauni, Locarno, August 7, 2015) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0BHD01_6fs
- 12 "Censorship in Israel" (Chen Tamir, *Guggenheim UBS Map*, may 2016) <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/censorship-in-israel>
- 13 "Israël à l'heure de l'inquisition" (Charles Enderlin, *Le Monde diplomatique*, mars 2016) <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/03/ENDERLIN/54916> ; Lire aussi « Israël s'attaque à la culture non patriotique » (Serge Dumont; *Le Temps*, 10 juin 2015), <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/2015/06/10/israel-s-attaque-culture-non-patriotique>
- 14 Vidéo : "Freddie Mercury and Queen arriving at Jan Smuts South Africa (Sun City)" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7NfZXwc45c>
- 15 "John Berger and 93 other authors, film-makers, musicians and performers call for a cultural boycott of Israel" (2006) <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=415>
- 16 *Déclaration des artistes en Suisse. Nous refusons d'être complices !* (2011) [http://www.bds-info.ch/files/Upload_FR/Dokumente/Kampagnen%20\(Nachrichten\)/Kultur/110901_declarationArtistesSuisse.pdf](http://www.bds-info.ch/files/Upload_FR/Dokumente/Kampagnen%20(Nachrichten)/Kultur/110901_declarationArtistesSuisse.pdf)
- 17 *Déclaration de solidarité des artistes et acteurs culturels de Suisse avec la Palestine* (2014) <http://culturesuissegaza.over-blog.com/2014/09/declaration-de-solidarite-des-artistes-et-acteurs-culturels-de-suisse-avec-la-palestine.html>