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A Message Crushed Again

by Katharine Viner

The Flights for cast and crew had been booked; the production schedule delivered; there were tickets advertised on the Internet. The Royal Court Theatre production of "My Name Is Rachel Corrie," the play I co-edited with Alan Rickman, was transferring later this month to the New York Theatre Workshop, home of the musical "Rent," following two sold-out runs in London and several awards.

We always felt passionately that it was a piece of work that needed to be seen in the United States. Created from the journals and e-mails of American activist Rachel Corrie, telling of her journey from her adolescence in Olympia, Wash., to her death under an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza at the age of 23, we considered it a unique American story that would have a particular relevance for audiences in Rachel's home country. After all, she had made her journey to the Middle East in order "to meet the people who are on the receiving end of our [American] tax dollars," and she was killed by a U.S.-made bulldozer while protesting the demolition of Palestinian homes.

But last week the New York Theatre Workshop canceled the production — or, in its words, "postponed it indefinitely." The political climate, we were told, had changed dramatically since the play was booked. As James Nicola, the theater's artistic director, said Monday, "Listening in our communities in New York, what we heard was that after Ariel Sharon's illness and the election of Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections, we had a very edgy situation." Three years after being silenced for good, Rachel was to be censored for political reasons.

I'd heard from American friends that life for dissenters had been getting worse — wiretapping scandals, arrests for wearing antiwar T-shirts, Muslim professors denied visas. But it's hard to tell from afar how bad things really are. Here was personal proof that the political climate is continuing to shift disturbingly, narrowing the scope of free debate and artistic expression, in only a matter of weeks. By its own admission the theater's management had caved in to political pressure. Rickman, who also directed the show in London, called it "censorship born out of fear, and the New York Theatre Workshop, the Royal Court, New York audiences — all of us are the losers."

It makes you wonder. Rachel was a young, middle-class, scrupulously fair-minded American woman, writing about ex-boyfriends, troublesome parents and a journey of political and personal discovery that took her to Gaza. She worked with Palestinians and protested alongside them when she felt their rights were denied. But the play is not agitprop; it's a complicated look at a woman who was neither a saint nor a traitor, both serious and funny, messy and talented and human. Or, in her own words, "scattered and deviant and too loud." If a voice like this cannot be heard on a New York stage, what hope is there for anyone else? The non-American, the nonwhite, the oppressed, the truly other?

Rachel's words from Gaza are a bridge between these two worlds — and now that bridge is being severed. After the Hamas victory, the need for understanding is surely greater than ever, and I refuse to believe that most Americans want to live in isolation. One night in London, an Israeli couple, members of the right-wing Likud party on holiday in Britain, came up after the show, impressed. "The play wasn't against Israel; it was against violence," they told Cindy Corrie, Rachel's mother.

I was particularly touched by a young Jewish New Yorker from an Orthodox family who said he had been nervous about coming to see "My Name Is Rachel Corrie" because he had been told that both she and the play were viciously anti-Israel. But he had been powerfully moved by Rachel's words and realized that he had, to his alarm, been dangerously misled.

The director of the New York theater told the New York Times on Monday that it wasn't the people who actually saw the play he was concerned about.

"I don't think we were worried about the audience," he said. "I think we were more worried that those who had never encountered her writing, never encountered the piece, would be using this as an opportunity to position their arguments."

Since when did theater come to be about those who don't go to see it? If the play itself, as Nicola clearly concedes, is not the problem, then isn't the answer to get people in to watch it, rather than exercising prior censorship? George Clooney's outstanding movie "Good Night, and Good Luck" recently reminded us of the importance of standing up to witch hunts; one way to carry on that tradition would be to insist on hearing Rachel Corrie's words — words that only two weeks ago were deemed acceptable.

Katharine Viner is the features editor at the [Guardian](#) in London and the editor, with Alan Rickman, of "My Name is Rachel Corrie," which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in April 2005. Because of the cancellation of the New York run, the play is transferring to the Playhouse Theatre in London's West End.

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