

Free Speech? Not When It Comes to State of Israel

By Robert Fisk

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You've got to fight. It's the only conclusion I can draw as I see the renewed erosion of our freedom to discuss the Middle East. The most recent example — and the most shameful — is the cowardly decision of the New York Theater Workshop to cancel the Royal Court's splendid production of "My Name Is Rachel Corrie".

It's the story — in her own words and e-mails — of the brave young American woman who traveled to Gaza to protect innocent Palestinians and who stood in front of an Israeli bulldozer in an attempt to prevent the driver from destroying a Palestinian home. The bulldozer drove over her and then reversed and crushed her a second time.

An American heroine, Rachel earned no brownie points from the Bush administration which bangs on about courage and freedom from oppression every few minutes. Rachel's was the wrong sort of courage and she was defending the freedom of the wrong people. But when I read that James Nicola, the New York Theater Workshop's "artistic director" — his title really should be in quotation marks — had decided to "postpone" the play "indefinitely" because "in our pre-production planning and our talking around and listening in our communities (sic) in New York, what we heard was that after Ariel Sharon's illness and the election of Hamas. ... we had a very edgy situation", I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

So let's confront this tomfoolery. Down in Australia, my old mate Antony Loewenstein, a journalist and academic, is having an equally vile time. He has completed a critical book on the Israel/Palestine conflict for Melbourne University Publishing and Jewish communities in Australia are trying to have it censored out of existence before it appears in August.

A one-off bit of skulduggery on Israel's behalf? Alas, no. A letter arrived for me last week from Israeli-American Barbara Goldscheider whose novel "Naqba: The Catastrophe: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict" has just been published. She has been attacked, she told me, "merely because I chose an Arabic title to my novel on the conflict... My



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Apartheid Wall



The Israeli Land-Grab Apartheid Wall built inside the Palestinian territories, here separating Abu Dis from occupied East Jerusalem. (IPC, 7/4/04).



The Israeli apartheid (security) wall around Palestinian population centers in the West Bank, like a Python. (Alquds, 10/25/03).

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brother-in-law has broken his relationship with me before he even read the book ... From members of my 'Orthodox' Jewish congregation in Bangor (Maine), I received a phone call from an irate 'friend' sputtering ... out: 'Don't you know the Arabs want to destroy Israel?'"

What do you do when a publisher — or an “artistic director” — caves in? I found out for myself not long ago when the Military History Society of Ireland asked permission to reprint a paper I had published some years ago on a battle between the Irish Army's UN battalion in southern Lebanon and Israel's proxy — and brutal — Lebanese militia, the so-called “South Lebanon Army”, whose psychotic commander was a cashiered Lebanese Army major called Saad Haddad.

In the paper, I mentioned how an Israeli major called Haim extorted money from the inhabitants of the south Lebanese village of Haris and gave the code name of an Israeli agent — “Abu Shawki” — who was present at the murder of two Irish soldiers.

I had published these details many times, both in my own newspaper and in my previous book on the Lebanon war, “Pity the Nation”. Maj. Haddad died of cancer more than 10 years ago. I actually met Haim in the early 1980s as he emerged from a meeting with the mayor of Haris from whom he demanded money to pay Israel's cruel militiamen — the UN was also present and recorded his threats — while “Abu Shawki”, whom the Irish police would like to interview, later tried to arrest me in Tyre — and immediately freed me — when I told him I knew that he was a witness to the murder of the two Irish soldiers.

So what was I supposed to do when I received the following letter from ex-Brig. Gen. Patrick Purcell of the Irish Army? “Unfortunately we have been forced to withdraw (your) article in view of a letter from our publisher Irish Academic Press. It is clear from our contract that (our) society would be responsible in the event of a libel action.” The enclosed letter from publisher Frank Cass advised that his lawyer had “cautioned” him because I had described Haddad as “psychotic”, named the blackmailing Israeli major and named the Israeli agent present at the two murders. It's interesting that Cass's lawyer believes it is possible to libel a man (Haddad) who has been dead for more than a decade. As for Maj. Haim, he remains on UN files as the man who tried — and apparently succeeded — in forcing the people of southern Lebanon to cough up the cash to pay for their own oppressors.

I better remember what I wrote in my newspaper just over six years ago, that “the degree of abuse and outright threats now being directed at anyone ... who dares to criticize Israel ... is fast reaching

McCarthyite proportions. The attempt to force the media to obey Israel's rules is ... international". And growing, I should now add.

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editor@aljazeera.info