

To the members of ACAR, ITI

On the direct behalf of the Israeli delegates Murad Hassan, Adi Moor and Amit Zarka, and on the indirect behalf of the entire theatre and performance artists' community in Israel, I kindly ask you to raise your voice against the dangerous anti-democratic, censorial, racist and fascistoid tendencies manifested in the following case that is symptomatic to the attitude and widespread repercussions of the current Israeli government to artistic freedom of expression.

Here are the facts:

For the first time in 38 years the Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre, an annual event that takes place every autumn, one of the most important artistic events in Israel, has been cancelled. This occurred due to the arbitrary decision of the Acco municipality that chairs the steering committee of the Festival, to retract the committee's initial decision to include in the 2017 program Einat Weizman's play PRISONERS OF THE OCCUPATION that deals with the Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons for violent measures taken against the repressive occupation by Israel. Acco's mayor motivated his unprecedented standpoint by arguing that the presentation of this play might unsettle the spirits in the mixed, Jewish-Palestinian, town, This is a preposterous argument since the festival, throughout its existence, has always been a political and provocative undertaking that produced much more agitative, political texts that opposed the official line than PRISONERS OF THE OCCUPATION. The mayor furthermore justified his position by contending that since Einat Weizman has performed a play at the Festival last year (2016), she cannot put on a production two years in a row. This motivation is unsustainable since there are other artists, included in the program, whose proposals have been confirmed despite the fact that they have participated in last year's festival. This act of self-censorship has been aggravated by shifting from an "artistic" decision to personal defamation of Einat Weizman on the part of the nationalistic elements in the steering committee by gathering denunciatory material on her from Facebook, screening "incriminating" posts that she published and creating a public atmosphere of incitement against her.

As a result of the outrageous decision to exclude PRISONERS OF THE OCCUPATION, the entire steering committee of this year's Acco Festival, and its artistic director, Avi Gibson, resigned. This act has been backed up by the other artists, who were designated to perform their works in the event, as well as by the Israeli performing artists' unions who decided to boycott the Festival of 2017.

It is obvious that the decision of the representatives of the Acco Municipality to reject Weizman's participation in the 2017 Festival has been inspired by the rigorous onslaught of the extreme right wing, nationalistic Israeli government against any kind of cultural opposition to the occupation and the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, as well as against those – especially artists - who adhere to the basic democratic tenet of maintaining pluralistic Freedom of Speech and Expression. Thus, for instance, the Cultural Minister, Ms Miri Regev, has issued criteria according to which the vital governmental subventions for any performative institution that will refuse to perform in the occupied territories would be reduced.

A unilateral proclamation of the ACAR, strengthened by the approval of the General Assembly – as representatives of a substantial part of worldwide theatre functionaries and theoreticians - in support of the Israeli theatre and performance artists in their protest against the unreserved and unconditioned right for artistic freedom in general, and the exclusion of PRISONERS OF THE OCCUPATION from the Acco Festival in particular – would be a highly significant step towards promoting the struggle against those forces in power whose actions are reminiscent of the darkest days in the history of the 20th century. It might also constitute a precedent for the position of the international artistic community against similar phenomena in other parts of the world.

Thank you for your attention. We hope for your sympathetic consideration and endorsement of our application.

Prof. Gad Kaynar Kissinger

President of the Israeli Centre of the ITI