

Performing Politics

My Name is Rachel Corrie

A Play by Alan Rickman and

Katharine Viner

Minetta Lane Theater, 2006

Reviewed by Tali Yahalom

It's hard to forget the name Rachel Corrie. Born in Olympia, Washington, the chain-smoking, tree-hugging blond spent most of her time making lists, playing in traffic, and burning American flags. That is, until she was killed at the age of 23 by an Israeli bulldozer, which had been preparing to demolish a tunnel used to smuggle weapons from Egypt into the Gaza Strip. Corrie's violent death, indisputably tragic, garnered tremendous media attention and pulled at heartstrings across the entire political spectrum. Perhaps that's why three years after her death in 2003, her poetry and diaries were compiled into the play *My Name is Rachel Corrie*.

Directed by Alan Rickman, the 90-minute monologue made its March 2006 debut at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and opened six months later at the Minetta Lane Theater in New York City.

It is not surprising that when a play centered around the Israeli Palestinian conflict comes to New York, home to the largest number of Jews outside of Israel, many people will pay attention to the facts included and excluded from the script. Since opening in New York on October 15, representatives from media watch organizations—such as CAMERA and StandWithUs—have stood outside the theater for as long as an hour before the show until well after curtain call, distributing fact sheets to playgoers. The handout, a double-sided piece of paper, emphasizes that “Rachel’s death was an accident” and that “Israel wants peace.” Most of the people who take these pamphlets,

however, don't pay attention to them, and skim them skeptically before tossing them into the garbage.

Designed by Hildegard Bechtler, the set is plain but evocative. One half is Corrie's bedroom, with a dirty cot, piles of laundry, and a crimson-colored wall covered in photographs. The mess matches her cluttered and disarrayed life well. The other side of the stage, darker, drearier, and less inflated with Corrie's bursting spirit, represents the Gaza Strip, where Corrie spends the second half of the play preaching peace in the Middle East and deploring the "Israeli occupation."

In both the London and New York shows, Corrie is played by Megan Dodds, who appropriately infuses the character with optimism, awkward self-confidence and a *joie de vivre*. Corrie's idiosyncrasies and character come to life, making her legacy unforgettable, for better or worse. "This piece is a tribute to Rachel as much as anything, and needs to stay completely truthful to the real person," Dodds said about researching and learning her character's role. "The words just took over."¹

The first chunk of the play is brimming with the young activist's idealism, and without prior knowledge of Corrie's bleak final days, she appears to be a goofy college student, envisioning a world where priests wear underwear on their heads and stockbrokers sport Viking hats. Israelis and Palestinians are barely mentioned during the first half of the play, and one starts to wonder why the play has caused so much controversy. One similarly, wonders why Corrie takes such an interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than, say, the genocide in Darfur or AIDS in Nigeria.

Early on, Corrie admits her limited capacity as a pro-Palestinian activist, lamenting that she can't save the world by herself. "I can't be Picasso," she says. "I can't be Jesus. I can't save the planet single-handedly. I can wash dishes." But the message is real, and therein lies the play's biggest strength—or at least its biggest tool of manipulation. The calculated compilation of Corrie's writings, the sole material used for the script, woos the audience, casting Corrie as loveable, well-meaning, and

correct. No questions are asked, for who would disagree with a pretty girl dedicated to saving the world? After all, this is the same girl, who a few years earlier, spoke on national television at a fifth-grade press conference about world hunger. Accordingly, when she eloquently proclaims that “we have got to understand that they dream our dreams and we dream theirs,” the audience is silent. She has them in the palm of her hands.

Just how seriously Corrie, an active member in the International Solidarity Movement,² takes herself is questionable: she calls her soul “nomadic,” and a list of her most important possessions includes her cat, journals, dirt underneath her fingernails, and hope. “I’m a junior in college,” she writes in her diary. “I still don’t have the conviction to cross ‘Spider-man’ off my list” of things to be. She is “the bad other girl” who painted her room the color of “carnage,” the family black sheep who goes to Evergreen State College, while her brother is an “Economics-major-high-achiever-khaki” and her sister a “high-heels-Yalie-corporate.”

Still, Corrie has reached the radar of Yasir Araft, who has called her a “heroic martyr.”³ Half humble, and half overly sure that what she’s doing is right, Corrie refers to a “cycle of violence,” in which David and Goliath, respectively played by Palestinians and Israelis, are at each other’s throats. And in between the narration of Corrie’s choppy biography are other jabs at Israel. But these quick jabs at Israel’s army, and even at US foreign policy, are quickly abandoned for lighthearted references to anecdotal information about Corrie’s life. She recalls a time when she was “so bored,” she glued all her photographs to a wall. And when she assuredly predicts that “you’ll fall in love with someone who’s always leaving you,” there’s not a person in the audience who isn’t nodding his head in agreement.

From the onset, Corrie’s speeches carry an ominous prescience, and it often seems that she expects her imminent downfall. She ponders death in the same way she ponders worldwide suffering, and her ruminations suggest a prophetic knowledge of the events to come. A retelling of one dream is

eerily clairvoyant and accurate enough to wake up the audience. “I had a dream about falling, falling to my death off something dusty and smooth and crumbling like the cliffs in Utah,” she writes. “But I kept holding on, and when each foothold or handle of rock broke I reached out as I fell and grabbed a new one. I didn’t have time to think about anything—just react as if I was playing an adrenaline-filled video game. And I heard, ‘I can’t die, I can’t die,’ again and again in my head.” Inner meditations like these are all over the place, but as Corrie jumps around, both physically across the stage and within her own mind, there’s an urge among the audience to join her, not only to follow her but to craft goals as ambitious, as humanitarian, and as prophetic as hers.

Corrie’s dream of a time when “everybody shouts hello to everybody else from their car windows” was shattered by her untimely death, but the play immortalizes her existence by resuscitating the loquacious girl as she articulates her lofty plans to fix the “flawed, dirty, broken and gorgeous” world. Her soliloquies, which were

taken from her diary entries and e-mails, are pronounced with emotional cadences, while wit and a jovial spirit emanate from her long-winded conversations with herself.

Of course, it is easy to take issue with the historical facts included—and omitted—by playwrights Rickman and Katharine Viner. There is no mention of when Corrie notoriously burned an American flag in front of Palestinian children, and the little historical context that is given neglects to inform the audience that Corrie’s visit to Israel took place during the second Intifada. Moreover, Rickman and Viner include seemingly irrelevant soliloquies that have nothing to do with the broader theme of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Instead, these speeches work to evoke sympathy from the audience and excuse the harshness of Corrie’s words. But while Corrie staunchly asserts that the “scariest thing for non-Jewish Americans in talking about Palestinian self-determination is the fear of being or sounding anti-Semitic,” she later admits that because she does not actually know much about the conflict, she does not always

realize the “political implications of her words.”

As creative artists, Rickman and Viner are certainly granted poetic license to craft a play with as much, or as little, information as they please. Still, to touch on such a controversial topic with absolutely no indication as to where fact ends and fiction begins is to play with wildfire that burns any potential bridges between ignorant audience members and the political reality in the Middle East. And so exactly what Rickman and Viner were thinking is unclear. It’s too easy to dismiss the play as an anti-Israel vendetta, because there is, after all, so much artistic value and beauty in this package. But the sometimes latent, sometimes explicit assaults on Israel and its military can’t be ignored.

To that end, Corrie’s own ignorance has powerful implications. She forgets her earlier admission that she’s not a historical expert, and declares that in joining the Palestinian cause, she is waging a war of good against bad. “What we are paying for here is truly evil,” she cries. “Everyone should drop everything and devote

[their] lives to making this stop.” In a phone conversation with her mother, Corrie begs, “Please think about your language when you talk to them...if you talk about the cycle of violence, or ‘an eye for an eye,’ you could be perpetuating the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a balanced conflict, instead of a largely unarmed people against the fourth most powerful military in the world.”

It is important to bear in mind that Corrie was not constructing a history book meant for public consumption. She was confiding in a diary, assuming complete privacy and giving no indication of any intention to publicize her observations and thoughts. “My biggest challenge was that Rachel’s words were not written to be staged,” said Rickman in an interview with the Royal Court Young Writers Programme.⁴ “We had to create a kind of narrative and progression so that you could feel her mind alive and changing and growing.” Although Rickman and Viner interviewed “many of Rachel’s friends from Gaza, talked to her family, and researched the entire situation in Gaza from the

standpoint of the Palestinians, the Israeli soldiers and settlers,” they said that “in the end, they didn’t use much of that material.” There is a meager attempt to incorporate facts, like when Rachel spews that “60,000 people from Rafah worked in Israel two years ago. Now only 600 can go there for jobs. Of these 600, many have moved, because the three checkpoints make a 40-minute drive into a 12-hour impassable journey.” This so-called factual data—numbers that she calculated based on conversations with local individuals—are chilling at first, but lack credibility and context.

Three and a half years after Corrie has died, debate still rages over whether her death was intentional. I.S.M. activist Tom Dale, who was 10 meters away from Corrie when she was killed, says that the Israeli bulldozer driver knew exactly what he was doing when he ran over Corrie. “She was 10-20 meters in front of the bulldozer, clearly visible,” Dale says. The driver was in “radio contact with a tank that had a profile view of the situation. There is no way she could not have been seen by them.

They knew where she was, there is no doubt.”⁵ But according to a report by the Israeli Defense Forces, “they had no knowledge that she was standing in the path of the tractor. An autopsy of Corrie’s body revealed that the cause of death was from falling debris and not from the tractor physically rolling over her. It was a tragic accident that never should have happened.”⁶ Either way, it’s clear what the playwrights want the audience to believe about the death of Corrie, whose actions Middle East historian Edward Said has described as “heroic and dignified at the same time.”⁷ Though the bulldozer scene is not acted out on stage, once Corrie finishes her monologue, a voice on tape tells the audience that there is no question that Corrie was killed by an Israeli soldier, who was well aware and in control of what was going on at the time.

In the end, one’s reaction to *My Name is Rachel Corrie* will boil down to personal political ideology. But that’s no reason not to see it. Regardless of political stance, Corrie’s life story, however suspect when framed in a historical context, is not

only compelling but also deserves to be seen. As the play comes to a close, Corrie evokes Anne Frank, offering a similar hope that “people are truly good at heart.” The play triumphs in painting a melancholic and compelling portrait of a woman who died well before her time, who left this world questioning her “fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature.” Corrie’s words bear witness to a world of hysteria and madness, where every corner on the globe could use some fixing up, and to focus only on historical inaccuracies and the absence of legitimate context is to miss the point. The play stamps an urgent message on the viewers’ minds, and that message, as well as Corrie, will continue haunting Israelis, Palestinians and ingenuous audience members for a long time.

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Notes

1. <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/files/downloads/Educationpack.pdf>
2. The I.S.M. is an international volunteer group, lead by Palestinians, which works in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, with the stated purpose of “committed to resisting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land using nonviolent, direct-action methods and principles” (<http://www.palsolidarity.org/main/about-ism/>).
3. <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/10/16/theater/reviews/16rach.html>
4. <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/files/downloads/Educationpack.pdf>
5. http://www.ccmeop.org/2003_articles/Palestine/031703_closest_eye_witness_account_on_t.htm
6. http://www.honestreporting.com/articles/45884734/critiques/Bulldozer_Accident.asp
7. <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1454963,00.html>