

Dance Studies Association: Open Letter

Introduction

A group of Jewish and non-Jewish scholars and artists wrote a letter to the Dance Studies Organization expressing their concern for a panel that is about to be presented at the DSA conference in Buenos Aires on July 25th entitled “Undoing Colonial Ambiguity: Keywords in Dance and Dancewashing in Palestine-Israel”.

The earliest announcement in the DSA program (as of April 15) indicates who organized the event and that it is sponsored by the DSA Board of Directors. Both pieces of information were omitted from the following announcements and were also withheld from us, the authors of the letter, in a Zoom meeting with DSA.

One of the main criticisms of the open letter is the DSA-sponsored presentation of Yabal Alzaitún, a cultural center led by Christian Abugattas, a Christian Palestinian-Chilean activist. Information about Abugattas can be found in this recently published text.* The text itself is anti-Israel in nature, but gives insight into Yabal Alzaitún’s position and what to expect in the lecture at the DSA conference. It is important to note that both the cultural center and Abugattas present themselves on social media in a way that fundamentally questions the existence of Israel. This applies to a video immediately after October 7 that has since been deleted, but also to the still visible posts that propagate a Palestine “from the river to the sea” – without Israel and without a Jewish population.

* Excerpt from Abugattas’ text – “Keeping our culture and traditions alive is fundamental because what you can see in the online genocide, we are living through is precisely that (Israel) wants to destroy our history, our traditions, steal our land and our dances, our foods, everything that has to do with us.”

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We, the undersigned Jewish and Israeli dance scholars, artists and allies are pro-coexistence and pro-peace. Ex-

ercising our right to Freedom of Speech, we state our belief that, in scholarly organizations, broad and inclusive academic discourse is the only antidote to the challenges and conflicts of our time.

Following the events of October 7th, 2023, however, it has become painfully apparent – through Dance Studies Association’s platforming of several political statements and most recently with the upcoming conference in Buenos Aires – that the Dance Studies Association does not agree. For July 25th, an event entitled “Undoing Colonial Ambiguity: Keywords in Dance and Dancewashing in Palestine-Israel” is planned for a main stage of the conference.

Framing Israeli-Palestinian history in this way, through language that demonizes Israel, silences Jewish and Israeli dance voices. The conflict between two peoples who claim the same birthright is complex. To willfully deny this complexity - and to claim that Israeli dance history, as well as contemporary Israeli dance, erases Palestinian culture while the panel itself excludes and erases Israeli perspectives - is anti-academic, anti-coexistence, and hypocritical.

The pain of innocent lives lost on both sides is unbearable and immeasurable. Therefore, to host a major presentation of Yabal Alzaitún whose online posts echo the perspective of Hamas is baffling. As of July 10, the most shocking post and others have been removed. If the intention is to open dialogue, where is the speaker who will respond? Where is the invitation for audience discussion?

Peace requires dialogue and mutual respect. Instead, with this panel, the Dance Studies Association is committing the very act of “dancewashing” it claims to oppose and fails to uphold its stated mission of “promoting diverse approaches and a globally inclusive, respectful dialogue.”