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Playwright Extols Farrakhan?

Liel Leibovitz

Wole Soyinka's plays are often inhabited by characters who struggle to understand themselves and others, trying to break free of tribal constraints and ethnic boundaries in an attempt to reach that which makes all human beings brothers.

Now, however, the Nobel laureate seems himself to be in the center of an entanglement resembling, well, a Wole Soyinka play.



It all began last week, when Soyinka addressed the Theatre Communications Group, an umbrella organization representing the lion's share of not-for-profit American theaters. Titled "A Ritual for Our Time," Soyinka's speech focused on two individuals: one good and the other evil. The pernicious one was President George W. Bush, whom Soyinka condemned for unleashing war on innocent people.

And the hero? None other than Louis Farrakhan, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, known for a slew of anti-Semitic statements.

This, at least, is Tuvia Tenenbom's account of the day. The artistic director of The Jewish Theater of New York, Tenenbom is no stranger to controversy; his last dust-up was with the Polish Embassy over the depiction of anti-Semitism in his most recent play, "The Last Jew of Europe." Tenenbom was present at the Minnesota conference, and when he heard Soyinka's praise of a man who had called Judaism a "gutter religion," he stood up and voiced his objection.

Soyinka's response, he said, shocked him.

"He told me that certain people complain too much about racism — obviously meaning me — and that it was time to stop," Tenenbom recalled the famous playwright's reaction. "He said that Farrakhan has toned down his anti-Semitic

attacks, and that I should just let it go. He was very angry when he said it.”

Tenenbom demanded that the TCG provide him with the speech’s transcript, as has been done for keynote addresses of years past. When they refused, he fired off a press release and posted it to his Web site.

It is here that the story got a turn worthy of any fine drama. Tenenbom’s press release was picked up by the Anti-Defamation League, which issued a statement on June 11 calling on Soyinka to “repudiate” his praise of Farrakhan. A few days later, however, the press release was pulled from the ADL’s Web site.

Enraged, Tenenbom said he called ADL Director Abe Foxman, demanding that the statement be returned.

“I said, ‘Abe, what are you doing?’” Tenenbom told Thew Jewish Week. “Why did you pull the press release? But he just hung up on me angrily. Doing this kind of business under the table is ridiculous; this smacks of communist regimes.”

There was nothing quite so nefarious about the whole affair, said ADL spokeswoman Myrna Shinbaum.

“We read the transcript, and we saw that [Soyinka] didn’t say what Tuvia Tenenbom said he had said, so we removed our press release,” she said. “It’s as simple as that.”

While an independent entry on a blog called Champions of Sound, written by TCG conference-goers who are not involved in the tiff, confirms that Soyinka indeed praised Farrakhan and was indeed challenged by Jewish members of the audience (the entry does not name Tenenbom specifically), it does not give an accurate transcript.

A spokesman for the TCG said only the group’s CEO could speak for comment, but he wouldn’t be available until the weekend. The group has yet to release the transcript.

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