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Day of Reckoning at the Hotel Chelsea |Main Farrakhan as Metaphor Angers ADL — Then Doesn't

posted: 6:27 PM, June 22, 2007 by Michael Clancy



Photo by Icy Mike via flickr

By Chris Thompson

Oh, that wacky Louis Farrakhan. He's been so many things in his life: cult leader; anti-Semite; apparent expert on hygiene and comparative religion. And now. . . metaphor for a broken planet?

That's what Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka was trying to get at when he invoked Farrakhan's name in a June 8 speech at an international theater conference organized by the Theatre Communications Group in Minneapolis.

In his keynote address about the importance of ritual in healing communities (or something squishy like that; it's all above our pay grade), Soyinka talked about three people who have used pageantry to soothe misery and anger. First, you got Aeschylus; no problems there. Then you got Sartre; a bit of a stretch, but whatever.

Then you got Farrakhan, and the Universal Day of Atonement he proposed a few years back. Whatever you think of Farrakhan's nastier side, Soyinka said, he was on to something there. If we could only return to the notion of humanity apologizing together on one day, the world could begin to turn away from war and greed.

Whoops. Soyinka broke the cardinal rule: don't ever bring up Farrakhan unless you plan to slap him around. Tuvia Tanenbom, the artistic director of the Jewish Theater of New York, was sitting in the audience, and he was promptly appalled. "In the first part of the speech, he was pandering to all of us about Bush and stuff like that, and contrasted it with the great man of our time, Louis Farrakhan!" Tanenbom recalled. "He said Louis Farrakhan had some great ideas. If we all accept that, wars would not be needed."

After Soyinka's speech, Tanenbom stood up and challenged him. "I couldn't hold it in anymore," he said. "And I asked him, I said, he is one of the most

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divisive men who exists in our time when it comes to race issues, denigrating the Holocaust, saying Hitler was a great man. ... I said, 'I think if anybody should atone, it's not us, the actors and playwrights and whoever, it's Louis Farrakhan who should atone.'

Soyinka replied that Farrakhan may be a schmuck, but that shouldn't preclude us from using him as a metaphor. And then he made his second mistake: he deployed an oblique reference to people who consider themselves victims. According to one attendee, the audience understood him to be referring to self-important theater professionals, including himself. But to Tanenbom, that could only mean one thing: those mouthy Jews.

The day after the conference ended, Tanenbom returned to his office and issued a blistering press release. Then he called up the Anti-Defamation League and got them to do the same thing. "It is sad and disturbing that a man of Soyinka's stature and respectability in the arts world would lionize a man like Farrakhan, who is certainly no role model," ADL National Director Abe Foxman said in the release. "We hope that Soyinka was speaking out of lack of knowledge, that he didn't know of Minister Farrakhan's long record of Jew-baiting and racism. Perhaps he simply wants to ignore it."

Ah, but then the staff at the ADL went and actually read Soyinka's speech. And promptly learned that Soyinka's point was considerably more complex, and that he had clearly denounced Farrakhan for, among other things, defending brutal African dictators. The ADL scrubbed the release from its web site and began the time-honored process of hoping this would all just go away. "We read the transcript and saw that Soyinka didn't say what Tanenbom said he said," claimed ADL spokeswoman Myrna Shinbaum. "So we removed the press release."

Now, Tanenbom is furious at Foxman, with whom he claimed to have a long-running feud. "The ADL today is a slave to the caprice of one man," the Jewish Theater posted on its web site. "Anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism, no matter how many 'kosher certificates' Abe Foxman is willing to issue to occasional partners in crime." Tanenbom has called on the Theatre Communications Group to release a transcript of the speech, so everyone can read Soyinka's sentiments for themselves.

But according to TCG executive director Teresa Eyring, they don't have the rights to Soyinka's speech. So everyone is apparently going to have to use their imaginations.

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