

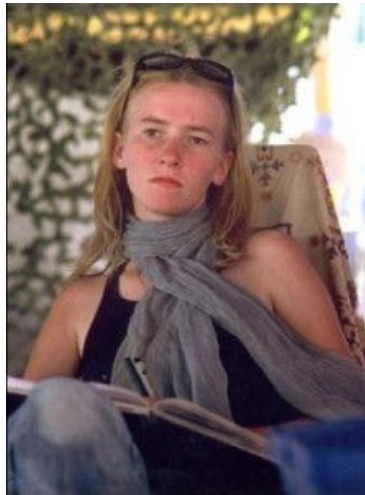
## Theatricum Opens a Controversy — and a New Space — With *Rachel Corrie*

**NEWS** by [Don Shirley](#) | August 29, 2011

*My Name is Rachel Corrie*, one of the most debated plays of the last decade, is finally about to open in LA – at the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum.

The Theatricum Botanicum? The alfresco Topanga venue where Angelenos retreat into a rustic and calming atmosphere, usually while watching familiar classics? Yes, that’s the unlikely place where this hot-potato play will open on Sept. 1.

*Corrie* is a solo, drawn mostly from the emails of its title character, a 23-year-old American who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer while working as a volunteer in Gaza in 2003.



Rachel Corrie

Since her death, Rachel Corrie has become known either as a gallant martyr or as a naïve intruder, depending largely on where someone’s sympathies lie in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This divergence of opinion alone could have created more than enough controversy for any production.

But the nonprofit New York Theatre Workshop added fuel to the flames by announcing a postponement of the 2006 U.S. premiere, which prompted howls of censorship from the likes of Harold Pinter and Tony Kushner and induced the original producing company, London’s Royal Court Theatre, to withdraw the rights from the New York group. Later in 2006, the American premiere finally took place in a commercial Off-Broadway production. Meanwhile, the Canadian premiere also was canceled under similar circumstances.

Since then, the play has received other productions in the U.S. and elsewhere, but none in Southern California. In LA, many of the strongest supporters of theater in general are also strong allies of Israel. They might be offended by *Rachel Corrie*, which never

pretends to explain the Israeli point of view in the conflict. Why would the Theatricum’s artistic director Ellen Geer take such a risk?

Let’s begin to answer that question somewhat obliquely, with a story Geer tells from her salad days – the ‘50s. The granddaughter of a Hungarian Jew on her mother’s side, young Ellen had been raised as a Unitarian. But when she was 16, she had a romance with a 40-year-old Israeli man. She studied Hebrew and made plans to go to Israel and join a kibbutz. Perhaps not surprisingly, her parents Will Geer and Herta Ware didn’t approve of their under-age daughter’s plans. Ellen Geer never made it to Israel.

At that tender age, she now recalls, “you have stars in your eyes.”

So perhaps it’s not surprising that she responded to the story of Rachel Corrie, a young American woman who also decided to go to the Middle East on what she saw as a mission to make the world a better place.

Of course, the two young women chose different sides – Geer had planned to volunteer in Israel, while Corrie — more than four decades later — became a volunteer in the Palestinian Territories. But Geer maintains that this difference isn’t important when considering the play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*.

The play “isn’t about Palestine and Israel,” Geer says. “It’s about a citizen of the world. She was where she was. If she had been in Israel, [the play] would have been from that point of view.” If the play “becomes a political basketball, it’s other people’s stories” [that are being told].

Let the basketball game begin.

In a statement that will be distributed at the *Rachel Corrie* performances at the Theatricum, the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and the American Jewish Committee challenge the idea that the play isn’t especially political:

“While we support the right to show *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, we have concerns with the play’s decontextualized and one-sided portrayal of complex issues. In the play, Rachel describes Israeli military operations, and the poverty affecting the Palestinians in Gaza. Yet the play does not detail the relentless violence perpetrated by Palestinian terrorists on Israeli men, women and children. In fact, Rachel arrived in Israel in January 2003, following the bloodiest year of the Second Intifada, a year in which 46 bombings – an average of almost one terrorist attack per week – killed 237 Israelis.



Samara Frame rehearses her role in “My Name is Rachel Corrie”

“It also does not mention that the poverty in the West Bank and Gaza may be attributed to Palestinian Authority corruption, including the diversion of funds from civil and humanitarian needs to arms purchases and manufacturing.”

When the play’s West Coast premiere took place at Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2007, in the metropolitan area that had been Corrie’s home, the Jewish Federation in that city bought an ad in the theater program headlined “All the Rachels,” which listed Israelis named Rachel who had been killed in Palestinian suicide bombings.

But at the Theatricum Botanicum, the program already includes an inflammatory statement from Corrie herself, which probably eliminated any possibility that the Jewish Federation might have to buy an ad instead of distributing its statement free of charge.

On the *Rachel Corrie* page of the season program, which has been distributed at all the Theatricum productions for the last three months, a Corrie quote goes beyond the excerpts from her writings that are included in the *Corrie* script and includes the red-flag word “genocide.”

In a sentence that doesn’t appear in the script but does appear in the program, Corrie is quoted saying, “I’m witnessing this chronic, insidious genocide...[in Gaza].” Because Israel was created largely in response to Nazi-perpetrated genocide, any use of the g-word to describe military action that’s not on a Nazi-like level of intentional, organized barbarity strikes a raw nerve within many supporters of Israel, who generally see Israelis as potential victims — not perpetrators — of genocidal impulses.

When I mentioned the use of “genocide” in the program to Geer, she immediately responded: “It was a mistake. It was wrong. It was not caught. I apologize for it, but it happened.” The Theatricum lacked the money to reprint the programs, she said.



Susan Angelo, Director “My Name is Rachel Corrie”

*Rachel Corrie* director Susan Angelo also expressed regrets over the inclusion of the “genocide” sentence in the program (and in a brochure, she adds).

Earlier this year, Angelo had included some of Corrie’s additional writings that are not in the script in material she provided for possible use in the program, because she found some “other excerpts [from Corrie’s journals and emails] more compelling” than some of those used in the script. That material included the “genocide” line, which she now wishes she had excised. (She notes the irony that when she was submitting the materials,

she was preoccupied with playing a role in Arthur Miller’s *Broken Glass* for the West Coast Jewish Theatre – the role of an American Jewish woman in the pre-war era, who is profoundly affected by reports of the Nazis’ Kristallnacht pogroms against German and Austrian Jews in 1938).

Angelo was living in New York in 2006 when the New York Theatre Workshop delayed the opening of *Rachel Corrie*. She remembers thinking that “if theater isn’t a place to explore controversial ideas, how sad.”

But in choosing to direct it five years later, “I didn’t see it as a political story. I saw it as a portrait of a young woman,” she says. This particular woman “saw other people of her generation defeated, powerless and not socially engaged, not appreciating the freedoms they had.” Upon traveling to Gaza, “she was able to put a face on the Palestinian people.

“Yes, I think she was naïve and not fully educated on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Would she have continued to educate herself if she had lived? The bigger issue is she was someone who valued human life, who was willing to stand up to protect it. She certainly didn’t agree with the violence on any level.”

Even British journalist Katharine Viner, who compiled the *Rachel Corrie* script from Corrie’s writings (with actor Alan Rickman), said that the script is “a one-sided view of the conflict” in a 2005 interview with the LA Times. “Rachel didn’t live in Israel, she lived among Palestinians. But to balance it up would have been crazy theatrically.”

In the script, Corrie begins to acknowledge an Israeli perspective only once, in passing, in these words: “The people of Israel are suffering, and Jewish people have a long history of oppression. We still have some responsibility for that, but I think it’s important to draw a firm distinction between the policies of Israel as a state, and Jewish people...” Then she added that “I’m really new to talking about Israel/Palestine, so I don’t always know the political implications of my words.”

Angelo volunteers her assessment that *Rachel Corrie* “is not a great play, by any means.” She nevertheless hopes her staging will convey that Corrie was aware “that she’s trying to learn, that she doesn’t have all the answers.” She hopes to do this by “finding the right actions for the actor [Samara Frame] to play.”

In case *Rachel Corrie* still feels “decontextualized and one-sided,” to quote the Jewish Federation statement, the Theatricum is organizing discussions after each performance in which panelists and audience members can express their opinions. Theatricum board member and frequent actor Alan Blumenfeld is helping organize these sessions. In an email, he said he hopes the panelists will represent a variety of views.

Blumenfeld attended a lunch with Geer, Jewish Federation (LA) senior vice-president Catherine Schneider and Rabbi Sheldon Kirsch, a longtime friend of Geer’s, to discuss the production and the federation’s efforts to provide a different perspective.



Samara Frame rehearses her role in “My Name is Rachel Corrie”

“Initially I was very concerned,” Kirsch says in a telephone interview. He hasn’t seen the play, but he has read it. “The play has been used for propaganda...I would rather that it had not been written, and I’d rather not see it produced.” However, he continued, “Ellen is an artist” — he attends one or two of her productions every year. Kirsch and Schneider both indicated they don’t want to infringe on Geer’s artistic license.

Geer notes that solo plays about particular historical figures, almost inevitably, tend to be one-sided — “if you’re going to do one on FDR, you’re going to hear his point of view.”

Financial considerations compelled her to consider plays with only one or two actors for this particular production, which will be the first full-scale show in the Theatricum’s 88-seat S. Mark Taper Foundation Pavilion — located northeast of the Theatricum mainstage, just west of the venue’s parking lot. All Theatricum productions use Actors’ Equity contracts, including those in this smaller space. Contracts require higher actor wages than those required by the 99-Seat Theater Plan, which is in effect at most of LA’s stages of similar size

Besides requiring only one actor, *Rachel Corrie* also fills another criterion that Geer established for the Taper Pavilion’s full-fledged inauguration — it will raise eyebrows. As at many theaters with larger and smaller stages, the Theatricum’s smaller space is “not our bottom-line theater, so I want to open plays there that are more risky.” Let’s not forget that Geer’s parents took risks in their political affiliations, which caused them to be blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

Still, while Geer isn’t averse to some controversy, she hopes the post-play discussions will make theatergoers of all views feel welcome. “We want to do the play in peace,” she says, “and it helps to talk.”

\*\*\* Photos from “My Name is Rachel Corrie” rehearsal by Ian Flanders

***My Name is Rachel Corrie*, Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. Thursdays Sept. 1-22, Wed Sept 21, 8 pm. 310-455-3723. [www.theatricum.com](http://www.theatricum.com).**