

Theatricum Presents Controversial Play About Mideast Activist

By Steve Wolcott
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The Topanga theater is offering a limited run of the politically charged "My Name Is Rachel Corrie," which focuses on the true story of a young woman who lost her life trying to aid Palestinians.

On many Friday afternoons near Topanga Canyon's Pine Tree Circle shopping area, a handful of protesters can be seen waving placards and encouraging motorists to honk to support their causes.

On four Thursday nights in September, another protester will make an appearance a few miles north, at the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum. In this case, she's the central figure in a special staging of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*, a controversial one-person play based on the life of a young activist who died while trying to protect Palestinians from Israeli forces.

In 2003, Corrie confronted an army bulldozer attempting to demolish a house believed to be harboring militants. Some people allege the driver ran over the 23-year-old on purpose. Others believe it was an accident. The incident sparked widespread controversy on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. So has the play, which is based on Corrie's prolific diaries and emails, edited by actor/director Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner. Rickman is famous for his memorable turn as Snape in the *Harry Potter* films, and has an impressive list of theatrical credits.



Since its 2005 premiere in London, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* has ignited heated debate, with some people saying the play presents only one side of the story. A New York production was postponed due in part to intensified tension in the Middle East and concerns over public reaction. The Theatricum Botanicum's board members—who don't shy away from controversial material—felt compelled to conduct advanced outreach with members of the Jewish community before the venue presented the play.

The structure of the play is straightforward, beginning with Corrie waking up in a messy apartment and gathering her belongings for a trip to Israel. Before she embarks on her fateful mission as a member of the International Solidarity Movement to aid Palestinian families, she reflects on her life through her writings. Actress Samara Frame portrays Corrie with unabashed exuberance, wide-eyed confidence and boundless energy while flipping through pages of her journals, recalling both eccentric and poignant moments in her past.

Corrie's love of the rustic Northwest, her self-deprecating humor and an innate poetic sensibility provide insight into a person some may know only from headlines. A surprisingly funny scene shows Corrie confronting her ex-boyfriend while simultaneously conjuring up happy "dancing" images to mask her jittery nerves.

However, once Corrie leaves her comfortable homestead and arrives in Israel, her mood and the play darken. An effective sound design echoes the cacophony of raw, busy street life mixed with a loud, unsettling military presence. The day-by-day accounts of her frustrations and fears trying to assist families grow grimmer as the play progresses.

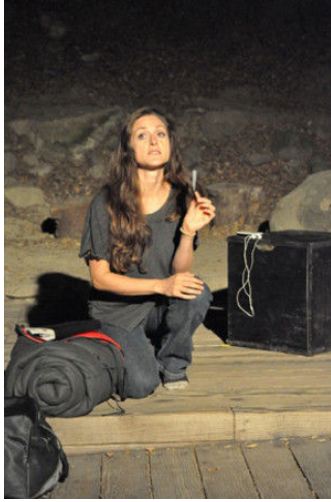
Real photos of the region reinforce many of her diary entries. Compelling audio correspondence from Corrie's parents showing both their pride and grave concerns for their daughter's safety play over a loudspeaker.

A frightened Corrie wrestles with the decision to stay or leave. These key



moments increase tension and anxiety as the play progresses to its inevitable climax, as Corrie pleads with the world, "This has to stop." The last haunting, moving video images of the real Rachel Corrie as a fifth grader illuminate her lifelong idealism and convictions.

Whether or not the play succeeds in swaying audiences toward Corrie's political bent, or they think she's naive, misguided or heroic, the acting, directing and staging of this production are first rate. One may argue that both sides of the issue should have been represented, but that's a difficult task since the script is drawn from the actual viewpoint of one person, not a playwright.



In hopes of providing balance and insight, the Theatricum producers offer literature in the lobby from several viewpoints. In addition, post-play discussions after each performance encourage audience members to share their thoughts.

On opening night, a panel, featuring director Susan Angelo, Frame, board member Alan Blumenfeld, famed cinematographer Haskell Wexler and former UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television Dean Robert Rosen fielded a variety of thought-provoking questions from the audience. The mark of a successful theatrical experience is stirring healthy debate long after the curtain lowers, and this show certainly delivers that.

Performances of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* continue on Thursday evenings, Sept. 8, 15 and 22 at 8 p.m. A moderated audience talk-back will follow each performance. To purchase tickets and for information, call 310-455-3723 or visit the theater [website](#).