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My Name is Rachel Corrie (review)

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this festival as a statement of Arab identity within Israel far exceeded the aesthetic value of any single production.

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MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE. Taken from the writings of Rachel Corrie. Edited by Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner. Directed by Alan Rickman. Royal Court Theatre production at the Playhouse Theatre, London. 17 June 2006.

Rachel Corrie, a college student from Washington State, traveled to Palestine with the International Solidarity Movement to make the world—in her own words—a place where “everyone must feel safe.” In March 2003, she met a brutal death under an Israeli bulldozer while protecting a Palestinian home targeted by the Israeli Defense Force for professed security reasons. It is shamefully ironic that more UK citizens are familiar with Rachel’s story than her fellow Americans as a result of the serialization of her letters and e-mails in *The Guardian*, writings that form the basis of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*. The recent “indefinite postponement” of the US premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop sparked cries of censorship leveled at artistic director James Nicola. One would expect from this uproar a volatile piece of propagandistic political theatre. Instead, the play amounts to a rather innocuous ninety-minute monologue spoken by a fairly benign young woman who tells an unforgettable story. But having made Rachel Corrie’s acquaintance through what amounts to a theatrical handshake, one comes away with mixed feelings about the choices she made leading to her tragic end as well as about the production’s dramatic strengths.

The setting offers a glimpse of Corrie’s two worlds: a harsh cement bunker amidst rubble surrounds a small bedroom area warmly lit by a lamp. The bedroom setting eventually moves to reveal a television monitor and a computer station set within the bunker. The set foregrounds the safety of Rachel’s college apartment against the brutality of the Palestine / Israel warfront—yet this dialectical potential does not play out dramatically.

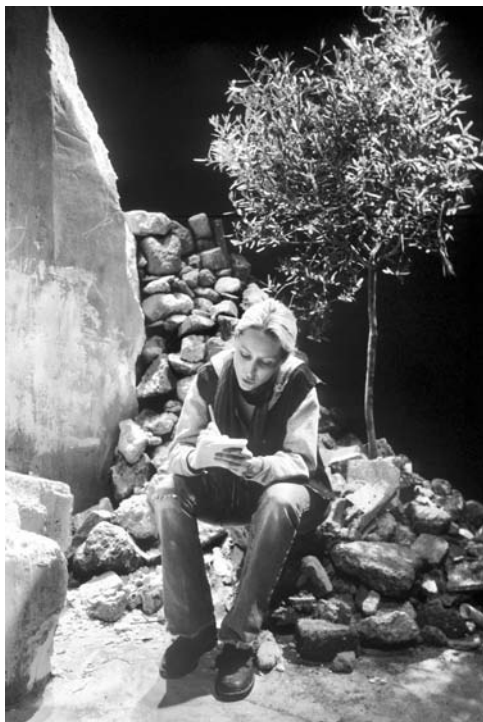
Initially Corrie (Megan Dodds) lies on her bed and speaks to no one in particular in a distinctly flat American accent. The charismatic Dodds fully inhabits the character of Rachel, and though her dialect can at times become monotonously grating,

Rachel’s words remain the show’s centerpiece. The sardonically frank text is laden with surprising and striking images, ranging from horrific descriptions of a dead body that “had a big white hand poised in the air . . . as if . . . throwing a baseball,” to descriptions of a boyfriend pronouncing “words like rubber bands stretched and snapping,” to anarchic fantasies where presidents wear “metal collars with tight leashes.” There are gut-wrenching passages in which Rachel describes her nightmares of being buried alive, eerily prescient of her own violent death. But even with such powerful language and an actress who can clearly command it, dramaturgical problems arise.

Diaries are private territories comprised of letters, thoughts, or scribbles composed to an anonymous audience. As theatre, Rachel’s writings remain indecisive in terms of who is being addressed. What is the role of the audience in the world of this play? Why has Rachel chosen them to tell her story? The monologue’s focus changes throughout the evening, from internal soliloquy to direct address to dialogue spoken between characters that are not physically present. The result is a performance with no rooted theatrical framework. It is difficult to express dissatisfaction with the writing, as Rachel’s journal entries, e-mails, and speeches have been respectfully edited by Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner (who is the features editor of *The Guardian*). Simply read before an audience with no theatrical adornment, Rachel’s words are moving and effective. But when positioned as theatre, the play’s lack of dramatic action becomes evident. Providing a larger backdrop to these words does not necessarily offer the audience any new information, nor is the text enhanced through dramatization.

The staging boils down to how many different places Dodds can sit or stand while speaking Rachel’s words. The production thus cheats the audience of seeing this formidable young woman take action. The actions we do see her perform are not complex: “she packs a bag,” “she puts on her shoes and socks,” “she writes in her journal.” Even her death becomes a simple action: “she leaves.” But none of these tasks illuminate the spine of the play. Even after entering Gaza, when her e-mails and journal entries become more intense and her idealistic energy is replaced by frightened questioning, she continues to engage in banal tasks that are not dramatically satisfying.

It is difficult not to compare Rachel Corrie to Anne Frank, another wartime diarist whose tragic story was dramatized. Indeed, there are echoes of Anne’s “Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart” in Rachel’s “I’ve been operating from the core assumption that we are all essentially the



Megan Dodds (Rachel Corrie) in *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*. Photo: Stephen Cummiskey. Courtesy of the Royal Court Theatre.

same inside." Yet, the success of *The Diary of Anne Frank* can in part be attributed to the fact that her diary was opened up; the audience was allowed to witness the dynamic human interactions of her life-and-death situation. With Rachel Corrie, we are never given that opportunity. She remains an isolated figure though her stories tell of heroic acts and enormous conflicts. She reminds us of a modern-day Antigone as she faces showers of bullets to reclaim a dead body. This is the stuff of great drama, which loses its force when related through the action of writing in a notebook. Could it be that Rickman and Viner are suggesting that ideal humanitarianism should come as easily as a set of everyday actions? Indeed, we hear Rachel state: "I can't save the world single-handedly. I can wash dishes." Perhaps the production seeks to emphasize this notion that simple acts can change the world. Yet, these simple acts bear little dramatic force, a problem unresolved by additional production elements.

Emma Laxton's distant and muffled sound design—replete with radios, sirens, and explosions—carries little dramatic charge. A too-small video

screen proves ineffective, particularly in communicating the final and possibly most moving moment of the production (a video of the real Rachel Corrie at ten years old). The screen's size diminishes the scope of Rachel's youthful vision and fails to resonate throughout the space. Johanna Town's lighting does provide a strong sense of Rachel's "aloneness" through its emphasis on sharp vertical lines, but Hildegard Bechtler's dualistic set design loses its force. Since we view the Palestinian bunker from the outset, there is no surprise to shake the audience out of the safety of Rachel's bedroom as Rachel is herself shaken.

While not enhanced by its production elements, *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* does emphasize the power of the word in accordance with the Royal Court Theatre's original mission to create a "writers' theatre, where the play is more important than the actors, director, and designer." The thoughtful script illuminates Rachel's hopeful wish to look "forward to seeing more and more people willing to resist the direction the world is moving in: a direction where . . . we are powerless and that the highest level of humanity is expressed through what we choose to buy at the mall."

My Name Is Rachel Corrie had its US premiere at New York's Minetta Lane Theatre in October 2006. Americans were finally introduced to Rachel Corrie through her words. In defending the cancellation of the original New York production, James Nicola suggested the play would have to be properly "contextualized." His statement seems like artistic cowardice. Indeed, Rachel asks: "What if our aloneness is what allows us to adventure—to experience the world as a dynamic presence—as a changeable interactive thing?" Compassion seems the universal message of these words. It should need no context.

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REVOLUTIONARY CITY. No author or director credited. Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, VA. 17–18 June 2006.

Colonial Williamsburg opened its 2006 season in late March with *Revolutionary City*. The performance, running in two-day cycles throughout the summer, stages scenes set in and around Williamsburg from between May 1774 and September 1781. The scenes combine documented events of the American Revolution (Governor Dunmore's dissolving of Virginia's House of Burgesses in May 1774, Benedict Arnold's