

queers against israeli apartheid vancouver quaia.vancouver@gmail.com

August 21, 2012

Dear Executive Director Drew Dennis, Director of Programming Amber Dawn, and the Vancouver Queer Film Festival Board of Directors;

We write today as members and allies of the queer community in Vancouver and supporters of the mission of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. We were delighted to note the theme of this year's festival, "Films for Fighters and Lovers," that speaks to the legacy, present and future of queer struggles for social justice and of raising oppressed voices.

In particular, we also note that in response to the work of queer and trans people of colour, this year's VQFF program is more broadly inclusive of films that reflect the experiences, perspectives and creativities of queer people of colour and indigenous peoples, particularly in the "Migrant Voices" and other programming streams.

However, we were disturbed to learn of the inclusion in the festival of two films whose screenings and production have been funded by the Israeli government and government-backed institutions, despite the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS), including cultural boycott. This call highlights the reality that Palestinians have been living under Israeli occupation for over 64 years, and emphasizes that international civil society action is urgent to support Palestinian human rights: namely, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and homeland, to end occupation, to self-determination, and to full equality.

As the VQFF, like all of our organizing, takes place on unceded and occupied indigenous land belonging to the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Skwxú7mesh-ulh Úxwumixw, Stó:lo and Tseil-Waututh peoples, it is particularly important for us to take note of the devastating impact of settler colonialism and to support and amplify indigenous voices. Settler colonialism, whether in Canada or in Palestine, is a devastating mechanism of white supremacy. The BDS movement is one international response of solidarity to settler colonialism in Palestine in response to an indigenous call – particularly crucial in our own context of settler colonialism, as is prioritizing indigenous voices here.

In 2005, Palestinian civil society organizations called upon people of conscience around the world to engage in boycott, divestment and sanctions – similar to the campaign focusing on apartheid South Africa – to use popular power of economic boycotts, divestment, sanctions advocacy, but also cultural and academic boycott. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has laid out guidelines for the international cultural boycott of Israel, as attached and available at PACBI's website, pacbi.org.

As PACBI notes,

"Since April 2004, PACBI has called upon intellectuals and academics worldwide to "comprehensively and consistently boycott all Israeli academic and cultural institutions as a contribution to the struggle to end Israel's occupation, colonization and system of apartheid."

In 2006, a decisive majority of Palestinian cultural workers, including most filmmakers and artists, supported by hundreds of international cultural workers, appealed to all international artists and filmmakers of good conscience to join the institutional cultural boycott against Israel....

[T]he Palestinian boycott call targets cultural institutions, projects and events that continue to serve the purposes of the Israeli colonial and apartheid regime.” (<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1047>)

This call has been taken up by cultural workers and academics around the world, including John Greyson, Barbara Hammer, John Berger, Judith Butler, Alice Walker, Ken Loach, Marilyn Hacker, Adrienne Rich, and Lisa Zuhair Hajaj. (<http://usacbi.org/endorsers>) In particular, queer organizers have found it necessary and urgent to take up the cultural boycott in light of what has become known as Israel’s “pinkwashing” campaign. Israel has launched an aggressive public relations campaign to market itself as an oasis of liberal tolerance in the Middle East. In particular, Israel is working to brand itself as the only gay-friendly country in an otherwise hostile region. By appealing to the global LGBTQ community to support the Israeli state at the expense of the Palestinian people, Israel is actively engaged in the “pinkwashing” of apartheid and occupation.

Palestinian Queers for BDS have stated, “As Palestinian queers, our struggle is not only against social injustice and our rights as a queer minority in Palestinian society, but rather, our main struggle is one against Israel’s colonization, occupation and apartheid; a system that has oppressed us for the past 63 years.” (<http://www.pqbds.com/about/>)

The two Israeli films featured in the VQFF, “Joe + Belle” and “The Invisible Men”, have both received sponsorship internationally, and on numerous occasions, by Israeli consulates, including the Israeli Consulate of the Pacific Northwest in San Francisco, which sponsored both films’ screenings at Frameline, the San Francisco Queer Film Festival. (<http://ticketing.frameline.org/festival/film/detail.aspx?id=2614&FID=49> and <http://ticketing.frameline.org/festival/film/detail.aspx?id=2648&FID=49>) While we are happy to see that the VQFF has no partnership with the Israeli consulate or other Israeli government institutions at its own screenings, we must note that these films have received extensive support from official Israeli institutions in their production and international promotion.

As PACBI notes:

“It is...well documented now that Israeli artists, writers and other cultural workers applying for state funding to cover the cost of their -- or their cultural products’ -- participation in international events must accept to contribute to Israel’s official propaganda efforts. To that end, the cultural worker must sign a contract with the Israeli Foreign Ministry binding her/him to ‘undertake to act faithfully, responsibly and tirelessly to provide the Ministry with the highest professional services. The service provider is aware that the purpose of ordering services from him is to promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art, including contributing to creating a positive image for Israel.’” (PACBI, op.cit.)

“Joe + Belle” is funded by the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, an institution named specifically by PACBI for its involvement in promoting “Brand Israel” internationally. AICF’s efforts are directly aimed at supporting the

image of Israel – and covering its reality of apartheid; as AICF describes itself, it works to “[d]epict the State of Israel as a thriving cultural environment that stimulates creativity and artistic life.”

(<http://www.aicf.org/about/mission>) This agenda is visible in the film’s own description, which notes that the protagonists “fall in love with each other and with their country.”

“The Invisible Men,” on the other hand, seems to be a socially-conscious and critical film raising awareness of the situation Palestinian queers face, both inside the Palestinian community and in the Israeli state. It is important to note that this film and its director personally have been sponsored by the Israeli consulate and other official Israeli government institutions on multiple occasions. Queers in San Francisco “mic checked” the Executive Director of Frameline during the introduction to this film, citing the festival for engaging in pinkwashing through its partnership with the consulate. (<http://quitpalestine.org/actions/frameline%202012.htm>) At this event, the film’s director, Yariv Mozer, who is deeply entrenched in the institutional Israeli film industry, serving as Board Member of the Israeli Film Producers Guild, former head of Entrepreneur Production Studies at the Jerusalem Sam Spiegel Film and Television School and also served as director of the 10th Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival, confronted protesters, labeling the West Bank and Gaza as “primitive” and stating that he was “helping Palestinian queers,” despite the stated positions of all Palestinian queer organizations, including PQBDS, Al-Qaws and Aswat, in support of the BDS call. (Audio available: http://www.indybay.org/uploads/2012/06/25/interview_with_filmaker-ed.mp3)

“The Invisible Men,” rather than supporting Palestinian queers, replaces their voice with an Israeli narrative, funded and supported by the very government engaged in a military occupation and apartheid structure in Palestine that targets Palestinian queers just as directly as every other Palestinian.

As a recent queer academic and cultural delegation to Palestine stated in its report:

“The liberation of the Palestinian people from the project of Israeli occupation is the foremost goal of the Palestinian people and we fully support this aim. We also understand that liberation from this form of colonization and apartheid goes hand in hand with the liberation of queer Palestinians from the project of global heterosexism.

We call out and reject the state of Israel’s practice of pinkwashing, that is, a well-funded, cynical publicity campaign marketing a purportedly gay-friendly Israel to an international audience so as to distract attention from the devastating human rights abuses it commits on a daily basis against the Palestinian people. Key to Israel’s pinkwashing campaign is the manipulative and false labeling of Israeli culture as gay-friendly and Palestinian culture as homophobic. It is our view that comparisons of this sort are both inaccurate – homophobia and transphobia are to be found throughout Palestinian and Israeli society – and that this is beside the point: Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine cannot be somehow justified or excused by its purportedly tolerant treatment of some sectors of its own population. We stand in solidarity with Palestinian queer organizations like Al Qaws and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (PQBDS) whose work continues to impact queer Palestinians and all Palestinians. (<http://www.alqaws.org>, <http://www.pqbds.com/>)...

We urge LGBTIQ individuals and communities to resist replicating the practice of pinkwashing that insists on elevating the sexual freedom of Palestinian people over their economic, environmental, social, and psychological freedom. Like the Palestinian activists we met, we view heterosexism and sexism as colonial projects and, therefore, see both as interrelated and interconnected regimes that must end.” (<http://queersolidaritywithpalestine.org>)

Today, we ask the Vancouver Queer Film Festival to join in the resistance to pinkwashing, and adopt the cultural boycott of Israel via the guidelines proposed by PACBI for future seasons of the festival. These guidelines do not exclude individuals based on nationality, but do exclude officially sponsored voices at the behest of an apartheid state.

This festival must belong to our communities – including Palestinian and Arab queers and queers of colour alienated from a festival that appears to be aligning itself with institutional advocates for apartheid. We would be happy to meet with the VQFF staff or board in order to further this discussion.

Thank you.

Best,

Queers Against Israeli Apartheid – Vancouver

Endorsed by:

Trikone Vancouver

No One Is Illegal – Vancouver Coast Salish Territories

Salaam Vancouver

Boycott Israeli Apartheid Campaign (Vancouver)

Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights – University of British Columbia

Palestinian Queers for BDS

Pink Watching Israel

NYC Queers Against Israeli Apartheid

Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (San Francisco)