

Nov 04, 2016 by *Naomi Leight-Give'on*

Street Performances, Political Protest and Cultural Diplomacy ^[1]

This past weekend, I had the privilege of attending a performance at the California International Theatre Festival in Calabasas. The annual festival offers an array of presentations meant to broaden “cultural understanding by means of community outreach, student training and cultural exchange through the performing arts”. As a whole, the festival is an excellent example of cultural diplomacy towards American audiences as presented by various countries such as China, Ireland, Canada and Mexico, among others.

The play I attended was the most engaging and powerful work of art I have ever experienced. *Stones*, or *Avanim*, was created and performed by the Orto-Da Theatre Group from Tel Aviv, Israel. *Stones* was inspired by the creation of the monument-sculpture “The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising”, sculpted by Nathan Rappaport as a dedication to the Jewish resistance fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto.

During the performance, six mime-artists, serving as living pieces of the sculpture, brought sixty years of Jewish history in Europe and Israel to life. It began with French music from the 1940's playing in the background, as the quiet audience stared at a replica of “The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising”. Suddenly, the sculpture began to move, and the mime-artists came to life. A variety of musical pieces, including a Spanish love song and the *Coca-Cola* jingle, along with some historical audio clips, such as Hitler speaking in German, added context and sound to an otherwise silent performance.

As the hour-and-a-half play unfolded, the six performers silently drew the audience into a world of fear, love, tragedy, independence, terror and hope for a peaceful future. Touching on themes of human rights, globalization, terrorism and peace, the performance ultimately told a universal story.

One main asset of cultural diplomacy is that it offers the ability to express common values and universal ideas across a diverse set of boundaries. *Stones* was an extraordinary example of cultural diplomacy, because it did just that through the language of art. Through this unique combination of performance art and history, the shared human experiences of comedy, tragedy, love and life were expressed.

The Orto-Da Theatre Group is an Israeli troupe which pushes the audience to think outside their normative space, to see life through a different lens. After the performance, the artists explained that Orto-Da started as a street-performance protest focused on social and political issues in Israel and Palestine. Associated themes, like human rights, freedom, life behind barbed-wire, terror, fear, hope, and peace, were evident throughout the piece. The performance demonstrated that these Israelis understand the tragedy that is the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict and can have a powerful voice even without speaking aloud.

Not only did *Stones* represent a wonderful piece of art and culture, it could serve as an excellent tool of public diplomacy for the state of Israel. Israel's actions are constantly under scrutiny – for better or worse – in the global media. The Israeli government has developed a plethora of public diplomacy campaigns with mixed results. If Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent *Stones* on a global tour, they might have better success at depicting a more nuanced portrait of Israeli culture.

More importantly, this Israeli troupe, which creates art designed to provoke questions surrounding current Israeli government policies, was brought to the U.S. with the help of the Consulate General of Israel in Los Angeles. This government endorsement of Israeli artists protesting against Israeli government policies is a demonstration of Israel's soft power and democratic values. The self-reflection within this performance illustrates the multifaceted nature of Israel and the Israeli people, and demonstrates a strong commitment to freedom of expression. Unfortunately, while the Israeli Consulate sponsored the performance, there was only limited publicity surrounding *Orto-Da's* appearance, and only about 300 people were in attendance. The Israeli government lost a great opportunity to engage a wider U.S. audience in a public diplomacy initiative.

In Israel, public diplomacy is called *hasbara*, which translates as “explanation,” often in the form of increased advocacy. However, explaining is not always the most effective way of communicating with foreign publics. As this performance illustrates, sometimes countries can communicate values and *explain* themselves without saying a word.

The California International Theatre Festival runs through July 25, 2010.
