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Censoring Sobol

The precondition imposed by the Ministry of Defense on performing the play at the Museum of Underground Prisoners in Jerusalem: censoring the “vulgar” expressions in the text.

THE PRODUCTION OF *ALMA* IS FURIOUS: THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE IS CENSORING US

Sobol, The Censored Version

For 13 years Joshua Sobol's *Alma* has been performed all over the world, but it is in Israel of all places that it has encountered a problem. The Museum of Underground Prisoners in Jerusalem, where the play is to be performed, is under the aegis of the Ministry of Defense. But there it was decided that the play is too vulgar and compelled the production to change the text.

After 13 years of being performed on stages around the world and garnering wall-to-wall acclaim, Joshua Sobol's *Alma* is finally coming to Israel. Co-produced by the Cameri Theatre and an Austrian production company, the play is due to be performed at the Museum of Underground Prisoners. The story is identical, as are the sets. The text – not entirely.

Scenes of nudity have been removed, erotic descriptions have been “toned down”, and in fact completely changed, and even a nude doll that appears at the conclusion of the play has been dressed – for reasons of modesty. The reason: The Museum of Underground Prisoners belongs to the Ministry of Defense that has demanded changes as a precondition to performing the play, which according to the Ministry will prevent damaging the values of the site.

The play, which follows the lustful life of the Viennese socialite Alma Mahler, is a remarkable production that has been performed since 1996 at unique locations around the world, such as palaces and expansive buildings. The Austrian government presented the play to the State of Israel as an official gift to mark its 60th anniversary, but it is only this year that it is going to be performed in Jerusalem. In light of the

play's uniqueness and the requirement for a unique site for its performances, Austrian director Paulus Manker searched for a suitable location in Israel too. The ideal location was found, as aforementioned, at the Museum of Underground Prisoners in Jerusalem.

"There is no doubt that this site is steeped in history and profoundly meaningful", said a senior source at the production, "but there is a feeling that they have gone overboard, that the play has been censored. Our hands are tied because there's a contract and we have no choice, but the result is a ridiculous situation whereby the Ministry of Defense is changing Joshua Sobol's text, whose writing they seem to think is too vulgar and pornographic".

Joshua Sobol, who originally wrote the play in English, relates that when he came to translate the play into Hebrew, he was asked to translate it in a manner that would benefit the Museum and its values.

"Bearing in mind the location, where people found their death, I chose different options and instead of explicit phrases I took the Museum's request into consideration and adopted more implicit directions", he says with a smile. "As far as I'm concerned it wasn't such a terrible thing to write 'damned' instead of 'fucking'. He returned the translated pages to the Ministry's representative, who either gave his approval or returned them for further revisions. Although he agreed to revise the translation at the request of the Ministry of Defense, Sobol did not conceal his disappointment at the need to do so.

"I think that if David saw Bathsheba naked on the roofs of Jerusalem hundreds of years ago, then in the second millennium one can show nudity in a theatre. However, they do make a valid argument. This is not a theatre but a museum. So we met them halfway. Where I could, I made changes, but where I couldn't, I didn't. I didn't feel coerced, but rather amused by some of the requests".

But there are some who did not like the extensive interference in Sobol's text. "It really annoyed me", said Manker, the director. "This was not a case of cursing that had to be toned down. I don't understand what they are so afraid of. In my view, in 2009 a developed country should formulate a different attitude towards art and the freedom of art, and not be afraid". Another member of the production claimed:

“We’re not in an Islamic country, this is a work of art. What’s all this Dark Ages thing? It could only happen in Jerusalem”.

The Ministry of Defense responded: “The Museum of Underground Prisoners in Jerusalem is a museum that commemorates members of the Jewish underground and their activities. This sensitive issue was presented to the director and he agreed to introduce changes into the play to adapt it to the character of the site. The changes we proposed were accepted without question. The management of the Museum had no comments or suggestions and had no hand in the changes. It is regrettable that the goodwill of the Museum’s management is now coming under attack on the basis of false claims. If the playwright or the Cameri Theatre think otherwise, they are welcome to perform the play elsewhere”.

Alma Mahler – The Censored Version

Original:

“His flies are undone and you can see his organ”

Changed to:

“His flies are undone and you can see everything”

Original:

“Fluttered over my naked body”

Changed to:

“Fluttered over my skin”

Original:

“Kiss your loins”

Changed to:

“Kiss you all over”

Original:

“Lying with open legs”

Changed to:

“Lying with open eyes”

Original:

“Franz, we fucked”

Changed to:

“Franz, we armed ourselves”

Original:

“I would ride him”

Changed to:

“When I was a horsewoman”

Original:

“Sperm donors”

Changed to:

“Those who sow in tears”

Original:

“Deflower”

Changed to:

“Defoliate”