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Once in BDS' Crosshairs, Award-winning Play Cancelled in Germany Over Alleged Antisemitism

The play, which also faced backlash from BDS activists in 2019 for receiving funds from Israel, was accused by Jewish student groups of relativizing the Holocaust, making comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany and 'Israel-related antisemitism'

[Jonathan Shamir](#)

A German playhouse succumbed to mounting accusations of antisemitism to call off the production of 'Birds of a Kind' on Thursday, even though the play has been performed in Israel in the past and even faced calls for a Palestinian-led boycott.

Munich Metropol-Theater decided to suspend all upcoming productions after the Jewish Student Union of Germany and the Jewish Student Association in Bavaria [called on Munich city hall](#) to halt their funding, accusing the play of relativizing the Holocaust, making comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany and "Israel-related antisemitism."

Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad's 'Vögel' ('[Birds of a Kind](#)' in English), which won the prestigious French grand prix de la critique for best play in 2018, follows a love affair between a Jewish man and an Arab-American woman and their trip to Israel.

It was workshopped with several Israelis and Palestinians, has scenes in Hebrew and Arabic, and its 2018 performance in Tel Aviv starring the famous Israeli [actress Leora Rivlin](#) received positive reviews, including from Haaretz. The Cameri Theater told Haaretz that no such accusations were levelled at them during its run.

The play also faced [a backlash](#) from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement in Geneva in 2019 over apparent funding from the Israeli embassy in France. The first production in Paris was partially funded by Israel through the joint cultural initiative, La Saison Croisée France-Israel.

The claims of antisemitism were then amplified by RIAS, a German state-funded antisemitism watchdog, and the head of the German-Israeli Association Volker Beck. Taking a less strident tone, Bavaria's antisemitism czar Ludwig Spaenle called the accusations "serious" and called for an investigation from the theater.

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Among the examples of alleged antisemitism in the play cited by Anna Staroselski, the president of the Jewish Student Union of Germany, was a joke made at the expense of a Holocaust survivor and the claim on stage that "Israeli soldiers would search Arab houses without cause, evict the residents and set their houses on fire."

In an initial response, the director Jochen Schölch said that the criticism took him by surprise and that the quotations in question were taken out of context. He offered an open conversation on antisemitism following the curtain-raiser, but the invitation in such a format was rejected by the students, according to Bavarian Broadcasting.

Although Munich did not drop its funding and the former mayor of the city Christian Ude praised the play's "humanity," Schölch announced on Friday that the play would be "temporarily suspended" given that a frank discussion "does not seem possible or constructive in the current heated atmosphere." He added that while he understood concerns around "censorship," the decision is a "clear signal against antisemitism."

Natalie Zemon Davis, a Jewish scholar who served as an adviser to Mouawad for the play, told Schölch in a private letter seen by Haaretz that "there were both Jewish (including Israeli) and Arab actors in the initial performance... During rehearsals, there was much discussion of the text – even revisions. No one found it antisemitic. The play received positive reviews, including for the Jewish press here (The Canadian Jewish News, for example)."

She adds that "the world-wide Jewish community is split in its political views in regard to Zionism and the character of the state of Israel. All my Israeli friends – and I have many, including former doctoral students-- agree with my view of the desired democratic and lawful nature of that polity. The Jewish critics of Wajdi Mouawad's play are of another ilk, so one can surmise from their statements—with a restrictive, frightened, and heartless view of what it means to be a Jew."

Emily Dische-Becker, director of the Diaspora Alliance in Germany, which fights bad faith accusations of antisemitism, said: "The play "Vögel" was developed by Jewish and Arab theatermakers, writers and historians. It portrays the complex ways in which trauma, conflicts around intermarriage and diverging views of Israel/Palestine, play out inter-generationally in Jewish families. That is perhaps why it was so well-received in Israel and reviewed positively by the North American Jewish press. Some of the play's German critics, who have called for it to be canceled, are distorting quintessentially Jewish disagreements, in favor of a formulaic flattened reading of what Jews are permissibly and plausibly like – and calling that antisemitism. I don't believe that erasing the complexity of Jewish experiences by calling for censorship is going to make Jews safer."