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Dear Drew Dennis and the Out on Screen Board of Directors,

It has been a great honour to be accepted to show my film in the Changemakers program at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. After speaking to you and reading your statement released on July 28<sup>th</sup>, I am encouraged to see a response from the festival to the public outcry around the issue that has been building since the initial screening of "Invisible Men" three years ago. I am also relieved that it was not the intent of the VQFF to send the message of solidarity with Israel that it did by printing the Yad B'Yad advert. Despite this, after much reflection I feel that the response from the festival has been inadequate and am called to address it publicly.

Though the statement and our conversation has made it clear that the VQFF has no position on the issue, I believe that choosing neutrality in a situation of oppression is a form of complicity. I ask the festival to recall the famous ACT UP motto "Silence = Death." Our queer history is marked by the principle that silence about oppression must be broken, and that this is a matter of life or death.

The siege on Gaza over the past three weeks has seen the death toll (majority civilian, disproportionately children) exceed eighteen hundred. Four-hundred and forty-thousand people have been displaced, nearly nine-thousand injured, and over forty percent of Gaza has been depopulated. The Israeli army has acted with impunity, targeting schools, hospitals, power plants and UN shelters, resulting in the total collapse of essential services such as sewage, electricity, and medical care. This is not a conflict between two equal parties; this is an occupation where the occupier consistently violates international law, and where civilian deaths on one side outnumber the other a thousand to one. At any time, but particularly in light of this I am lending my voice to others who are asking the Vancouver Queer Film Festival to use its voice as a well-respected organization to make a difference.

The ongoing occupation in Gaza *is* a queer issue for two very important reasons.

- 1) Whether we like it or not *the project of pinkwashing has involved* us. It dehumanizes Palestinians in our name, it frames Israel as a liberal democracy in our name, and it fuels islamophobia and racism in our name.
- 2) *Queer is a political identity*, and that to wear it, we make a commitment to act in solidarity with all other oppressed people. This includes those opposing occupation, displacement, and apartheid from Turtle Island to Palestine. Our queer liberation is tied to the liberation of all people.

Pinkwashing is not innocuous. It is intentional, and it causes harm. It is a tactic used by the Israeli government which uses queerness to represent Israel as a modern, liberal, democratic state concerned with human rights and to divert international attention away from the state's violation of Palestinian human rights. The Yad B'Yad advertisement also was not innocuous. As with all pinkwashing, its function is to make people living in liberal democracies like Canada feel a sense of affinity with or investment in the Israeli state. The implication of this message is that Israel must practice apartheid, colonialism, and violence in order to preserve freedoms like gay rights.

As queers with a conscience, what is the way to move forward? The answer is simple. Palestinian civil society (including all Palestinian queer organizations) is united in their call for solidarity through the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. This includes the boycott of Israeli cultural

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products such as film. I understand that the festival has struggled with the difficult questions of censorship, free speech, and the power of film and media to engage with the issues constructively.

Unfortunately, the Israeli government shares our belief in the power of media, which is why they have been targeting many cultural institutions including film festivals with increased support in recent years. It is no coincidence that the advertisement ended up in the VQFF program – it is part of a larger attempt at pinkwashing the atrocities on the ground in Palestine. In response to this, the VQFF is being called to adopt a policy of cultural boycott.

I was initially pleased and relieved to hear that the festival will be donating the proceeds of the Yad B'Yad advertisement to Just Vision, a Palestinian/Israeli media organization working to end the occupation. After doing research on Just Vision's films, I have found that these films perpetuate the oft-repeated misrepresentation of the Israel/Palestine conflict as a conflict between two warring parties, equally responsible for a "cycle of violence". The solution, according to Just Vision, rests on the facilitation of nonviolent dialogue. Though it is important work, this constitutes the erasure of the systemic disparity of human rights, the ongoing theft of Palestinian land and lives, and the denial of any sort of meaningful Palestinian recourse within a legal framework.

Stonewall was a riot: a riot instigated by young trans women of colour who were then further marginalized from the gay rights movement for being too violent (too femme, too trans, too Black and Latino). As queers we are called to learn a difficult lesson about how the rhetoric of nonviolence can silence the most marginalized voices – those disproportionately black and brown bodies for whom rebellion is a matter of life or death. To view our history of queer struggle as nonviolent is to sugarcoat and whitewash history. There is a parallel to be made between the rejection of the queer people of colour who started our movement with fists and bottles, and the erasure of Palestinian resistance which does not fit the comfortable image of peaceful dialogue and mutual understanding.

I am encouraged to hear that the festival will be engaging with an external facilitator in the fall. Regardless of the conflicting perspectives of members of the film festival, the social justice mandate of the VQFF obligates you to speak out against injustice. As this is revisited, I ask that this lead to *concrete action*, including:

- 1) That the festival come out against Israeli apartheid and make a statement which explicitly addresses the issues at hand including a condemnation of Israeli war crimes, and a statement opposing pinkwashing
- 2) That the money from the Yad B'Yad advert be donated towards humanitarian aid to the victims of the ongoing massacre in Gaza
- 3) That a specific policy be drafted about pinkwashing, and a boycott of Brand Israel cultural products in programming, advertising, and all other aspects of the festival be adopted.

I know the Vancouver Queer Film Festival to be a forward thinking and dedicated community organization, and I have decided not to pull my film as an act of good faith that this issue will be taken seriously when it is revisited in the fall. Though the mandate of the VQFF may end at celebrating queer lives through film, your moral obligation does not.

Sincerely and with the deepest respect,

**Mik Turje**

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